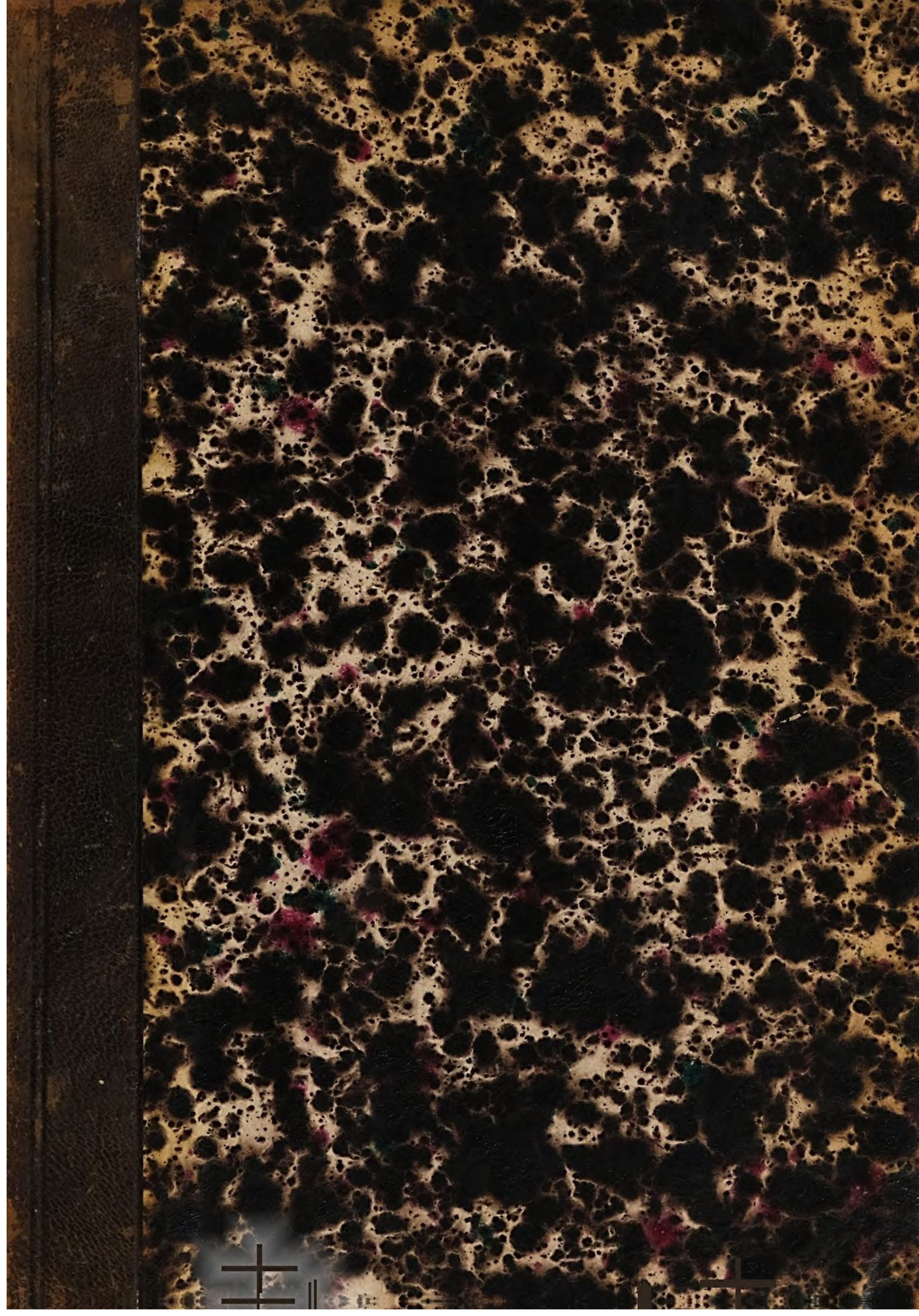




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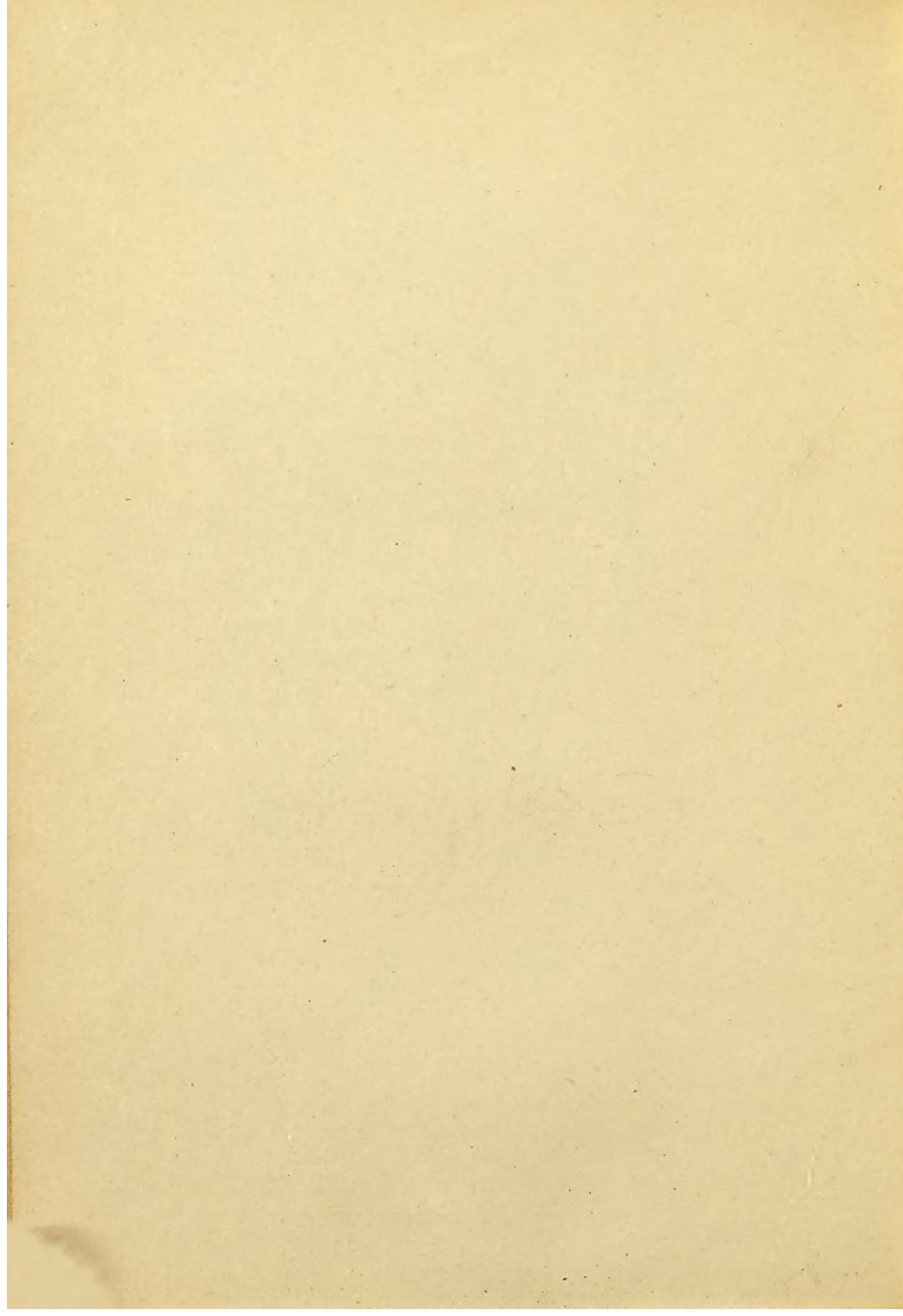
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THE ROCHEMONTS

THE ROCHEMONTS

A STORY OF THREE HOMES

BY

EMMA MARSHALL

AUTHOR OF 'LIFE'S AFTERMATH,' 'LADY ALICE,'
'MRS. MAINWARING'S JOURNAL,' ETC.

'Therefore let memory turn again to home,
Feel, as of old, the joy of drawing near,
Watch the green breakers and the wind-tossed foam,
And see the land-fog break, dissolve and clear:
Then think a sky-lark's voice far sweeter sound
Than ever thrilled, but over English ground.'

JEAN INGELOW.

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1883.



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THE ROCHEMONTS.

CHAPTER I.

THREE HOMES.

'Do you not know I am a woman?
When I think, I must speak.'

SHAKESPEARE.

'A rosebud set with little wilful thorns,
And sweet as English air could make her.'

THE PRINCESS.

FAR away in a remote corner of the eastern counties there is a village where, fifteen or sixteen years ago, no "resonant steam eagle" sounded its shrill whistle, and the people trusted to carts and coaches for locomotion.

East Repton is a scattered village, with labourers' cottages and small farms sprinkled within its boundaries, clustering, perhaps, a little more thickly near the old, grey, weather-beaten church

which raises its fine Norman tower with simple dignity above the level plain in which it stands.

East Repton is not far from the sea; and the roar of the great billows of the German Ocean may be heard on wintry nights, as they break against the base of the sand-cliffs of that desolate shore.

The small watering-place of Rolleston lies some four or five miles to the north of East Repton; but all along, the coast is thinly peopled, and there are only a few fishing hamlets, half hidden in the little lonely chines or chasms in the cliffs, which attract but little notice and are inhabited by rough seafaring folk, who have but scant communication with the outer world.

There are but three houses of any importance in East Repton: the Hall, the Cottage, and the High Bank House.

The Hall is the original home of the Roche-monts, and the head of the family settled there as far back as the sixteenth century, when fair Anne Boleyn was a near neighbour at Blickling Hall, and her happy girlhood had not yet fallen under the shadow of Henry VIII.'s fatal crown.

Geoffrey de Rochemont was of Norman extraction, and his ancestors had come over with the great Duke,—a tradition better founded in the Rochemont family than in many others who claim descent, with proud exaltation, from the fierce Northman who laid the power of the Saxons in the dust at the battle of Hastings.

Geoffrey had many sons and daughters, and

though at the time of the Great Rebellion his descendants broke up into parties, and East Repton Hall was for a time deserted, one of their name settled himself again under the old roof-tree when the troubles were over, and another became foremost in commercial enterprise in the city of Wyche-ster, and amassed what in those days was a goodly fortune.

As time went on the mercantile branch of the family intermarried with that of the landed proprietor, and the Cottage and High Bank House—all belonging to the Rochemonts—were built upon the estate as dower-houses, where widows and unmarried daughters retired in due course.

At the time of which I write, Gabriel Rochemont was living at the Hall. The widow of his cousin Ambrose lived at the Cottage; and her son was shortly to bring home his bride to the High Bank House.

It was a curious settlement of Rochemonts, suggesting the days of patriarchal communities; and there was, as might be expected, a feeling of clanship amongst the inhabitants of the three houses.

Gabriel Rochemont farmed, and was a keen sportsman—most east-country squires are like him in this. He read the papers and a few good books; his wife was a woman of simple tastes and habits and was happy to make East Repton her home without the constant hankering after change of scene and variety which marks the present day. Gabriel Rochemont had no son: five little daugh-

ters had been born in succession, and as he was the only son of his father, the elder branch of the house seemed in danger of dying out. Mrs. Rochemont, or Madame Rochemont as she was called by the village people, was one of those gentle, God-fearing women, who can say with earnest faith, "God's will must be best"; and often when she was inclined to sigh for a boy, she would think of all the sorrows undutiful and rebellious sons brought upon their parents, and dwell with thankful joy upon her five sweet daughters, who were some of them standing on the brink of womanhood, and others still bright and careless in childish joys and pleasures.

The five Miss Rochemonts were not at all after the present type of young ladyhood. They delighted with ever fresh delight in the first primrose in the woods in spring, in the sight of a thrush's nest with its pretty spotted eggs, in the wide expanse of heathery hills which stretched seaward from their home, and where they were as much at ease, and as lithe and graceful in their movements, as the young deer were in the park.

The Miss Rochemonts were not highly educated; they had never heard of stiff examination papers or women's rights. With the help of an excellent governess—who knew all she professed, and a great deal more—they were well read in the history of their own country and of other countries also, and it would have been difficult to puzzle them with a geographical question, or to catch them out in a slip in grammar.

Five happy sisters! always using the plural pronoun for all their possessions, and clinging with loyal allegiance to each other and to their parents; full of spirits, health, and vigour—they were young gentlewomen in the best sense. Their mother's Scotch origin had tinged their character with steadfastness and perseverance, while the vivacity and quickness of the Rochemonts was not wanting in them.

Janet and Claire, the two eldest girls, were just nineteen and twenty-one when my story opens. Next to Claire came Margaret and Mary, twins of fifteen; and lastly, the pet and darling of the whole family, Christine, a child of ten, with golden hair floating over her shoulders, and eyes as blue as the gentians which grew in a sheltered corner of the kitchen-garden. This was the family at the Hall, a low irregular building, surrounded by trees and presenting many forms of architecture in its long façade. The centre block was of old grey-stone, and had a curious heavy coping, in the middle of which was a shield, with the date 1500. To the right of this block was a long, straggling wing of red brick, in the style of Queen Anne's days; and to the left a more modern erection, with a bay window jutting out at the end upon a smooth well-kept lawn and greenhouse: the latter was built by the present owner's father, to gratify his only daughter's taste for flowers when consumption had laid its hand upon her. Tender memories always gathered round Aunt Bridget's "house," and the children always delighted to hear

their father's stories of his boyhood, connected as they were with the sister who had so long ago entered into the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Passing through the park, and crossing the high road, a gate opened into a winding drive, under a bank of plantation, and came suddenly upon a clearing, where the Cottage was built. It was a cottage which deserved its name, with low-roofed rooms and little up and down passages and odd nooks and corners, where bedrooms, like pigeonholes, were close under the eaves, the small latticed windows covered with a luxuriance of Ayrshire roses and clematis, which thrive and flourished in this sheltered nook.

The bright May sunshine was lying in golden bands across one of the long turf walks through the plantation, as Janet and Claire Rochemont crossed it, and opening a little white gate, entered the Cottage grounds.

The blue hyacinths were in their glory, and the primroses scarcely past their prime, while the woods were echoing with the song of birds, singing as east-country birds alone know how to sing.

"We shall have a nightingale soon," Claire said, "if this weather lasts. And how calm the sea looks!" she continued, as they came within sight of the blue water, lying serene and bright at the end of the long gorge which stretched from the Cottage to the shore in a gentle descent

of some two miles. "There is nothing like May, a real May like this."

"How different to this time last year, when Cousin Ambrose was dying! I remember it was as cold and wet as November. There is Cousin Anna—take care!" said Janet, and the two girls came suddenly upon a tall figure in a widow's dress, which had been hidden by a thick fence of arbutus and laurel bushes.

"Well, Janet and Claire, I wondered if ever I should see you again. Bridget was saying this morning she thought you must have gone away."

"Bridget could have come to find out, Cousin Anna," said Claire, quickly. "She does not often find her way to the Hall."

"Never mind, my dear, it is tiresome to discuss each other's shortcomings. Bridget has been very much occupied at High Bank House, doing all I would do, in preparation for my daughter-in-law if I were able; and then Bernard is here, and they have been riding together to-day over the country. Ah! here they are"—and Mrs. Rochemont turned at the sound of horses' feet to smile at the two equestrians, who rode slowly down the drive.

The mother's eye lingered proudly on the little light figure in the closely-fitting invisible green riding habit, as the grey pony was reined in, and Bridget had alighted before Bernard, saying—

"Back at last, dear mother. Did you think I had broken my neck, and Bernard was trying to mend it? How do you do, Janet and Claire? Here is my cousin, Bernard Wentworth."

Bernard greeted warmly the two sisters; and taking the reins from Bridget's hands, led away the horses to the stable.

"Come in, and stay to tea, won't you?" said Bridget, turning to her cousins. "Oh, I forgot, you dine late at the Hall; but come in, nevertheless."

I could not describe Bridget Rochemont if I tried. There was a completeness and finish about her which was her chief characteristic. No one could call her pretty, and most assuredly no one could say she was plain. There was no regularity of feature, but infinite variety of expression; she had been her dead father's joy and pride, and had brightened the town house in Wycheater and the Cottage at East Repton for him. When he lay dying he had commended his wife to Bridget rather than to his sons: Ambrose, who succeeded him in the Bank at Wycheater; Anthony, who was a vagrant on the face of the earth; and Blake, who was now a student at Trinity College, Cambridge. "Bridget will be your mainstay," he had said to his wife. "She has excellent judgment and good common-sense. I leave you to her."

Perhaps this reversing of the natural order of things had its disadvantages. It was well known that Cousin Anna disliked trouble; and provided she could lead a quiet, easy-going life, she was content. Bridget, on the contrary, loved to rule and to exert her authority. She was quick of speech and rather sharp in her judgments. Her words often pierced deeper than she meant, and her opinions were delivered with more asperity

than she was herself at all conscious of. Her cousins at the Hall stood somewhat in awe of her; none of them felt they were a match for her; except, perhaps, Claire, who was slightly in the ascendant in her own harmonious, peace-loving home, and who could resent Bridget's interference, as she called it, when need arose. Nevertheless, Bridget had her kingdom, and ruled with wisdom on the whole; and her steadfast and reliable nature never failed her friends in the hour of trouble.

Bridget was twenty-five, lithe and supple in figure, and brave and strong of heart; and none who looked into her clear grey eyes could doubt her honesty and sincerity of purpose. Between her and Bernard Wentworth—her cousin on her mother's side—there had sprung up a friendship which was more to Bridget than she thought. Bernard had a quiet way of resisting Bridget which no one else ever had; and she would take from him what no one else but himself would have ventured to say.

The little drawing-room at the Cottage was full when all the cousins were gathered in it, and Janet and Claire could hardly find room to move towards a closet in the wall where several of Ambrose's wedding presents were exhibited.

"The silver salver was presented yesterday by the head clerk in the Bank; is it not a pretty one, and so gratifying! And that blue china vase was sent to-day from Miss Penrose."

"It is beautiful——" Claire began.

"I think it so ugly," Bridget interposed. "I

do dislike old blue china ; and I don't believe in people's admiration of it. Now, Janet, don't say it is pretty."

"My dear Bride," Mrs. Rochemont began, in the deprecating tone she generally adopted to her daughter, "My dear Bride, it is really a valuable present."

"Nominal value, mother, purely nominal ; and anyhow it cost the giver nothing. So why should she make such a flourish of trumpets as she did in her note this morning ?"

"It belonged to an ancestress of hers who was maid of honour to Queen Anne," Mrs. Rochemont went on, to Claire. "And don't you admire this tea caddy ?—real Japanese inlaid work, Mr. Bright sent that."

"I hate the whole system of levying a tax upon one's friends and acquaintances when one is married," said Bridget. "I shall request my friends to take notice I think it a custom more honoured in the breach than in the observance."

"Wait till your time comes, Bridget," said Bernard, who had now joined the party ; "you will change your mind when it becomes a personal matter."

"That is not very likely," Bridget said, the confident tone changing a little. "But, girls, have you heard that the new clergyman is come to the vicarage ? Blake knew him at Cambridge, and says he is marvellously clever. Has Cousin Gabriel seen anything of him ?"

"Yes, I heard father say he called upon him the other day. He is an old man, is he not?"

"Old! my dear, men are not old at eight and forty. I am interested in him because Blake says he is a thoroughbred naturalist; knows every flower and fish and bird by name, and all their habits and modes of thought. It is refreshing to hear this news, when one expected a book-worm, who was as dry as the old calf-skin of his classic volumes."

"Oh, I am glad he is that sort of man," said Claire, heartily. "I dare say he will be able to tell me if that was the real mountain cistus I found the other day on the Old Beacon."

"No doubt he will, Claire! and a great deal about the sea anemones at Rolleston. We shall all be well up in the fauna and flora of our district before this time next year. Has the post-bag come, mother?"

"No, dear, I think not; you can ring and inquire." But Bridget did not wait for so slow a process, and went off herself to the back regions of the Cottage to investigate.

"That incorrigible little Tom has not come back yet," she said, as she returned; "and old Hickes is groaning over the horses, which he has to look after himself. If you really won't stay to tea, Janet and Claire, I will walk up the drive with you and meet the little snail, and give him a lecture. I dare say he has played a game of ring-taw between this and the post-office."

"The letters do not always come in from

Halesham," Janet interposed. "I heard father talking about it the other day."

"And perhaps there are no letters this evening, Bride. Who is it you expect to hear from?"

"My dear mother! with Ambrose's wedding fixed for this day fortnight, how can you ask such a question? I shall hear from Maude her final orders as to the day of my departure for Clifton; and I shall hear from Blake, whether he is coming to the wedding or not; and I shall hear from——" Bridget paused.

"Name unknown," suggested Bernard, as he walked away from the open door.

"Are you not coming with us?" Bridget asked.

"Yes! if you want me," he said carelessly, as he joined the three girls and sauntered up the drive with them. The recusant Tom was met half way, and received his reprimand, administered in a few terse words.

The key of the bag was produced from Bridget's watch-chain, and signified her dominion over the letters, as over most other things.

"Bernard Wentworth, Esq.," she said, reading the address; "a foreign letter, and what a dreadful hand. Miss Rochemont—Miss Rochemont——no, the other is for mother;" and there was a shade of disappointment in the tone. "There, take that to the house, Tom; and then go and help Hickes with the ponies. And make haste; no more dawdling, please."

"What nonsense!" Bridget went on, as she

read ; "Maude says I must go to her next Monday. I cannot possibly do it. I have heaps to do here first. And she says they have altered the colour of the bridesmaids' dresses, because some Miss Ross can't wear pink with red hair. What a bore ! And I shall have to wear blue, which makes me look green, by way of contrast. Claire, you shall be bridesmaid instead of me. I am too old, to begin with ; and blue will suit your golden locks. Will you, Claire ?"

"I must wait till I am asked," Claire said.

"But you *are* asked. Maude said the more Rochemonts at the wedding the better. And she said weeks ago, 'Do persuade Mrs. Rochemont to let one of her girls come.' I shall go and ask Cousin Grace at once—now—this very minute. Then you can pay your respects to the head and chief of our family, Bernard, which you ought to have done before. How engrossed you are with that letter !"

"Not so much as you are with yours, apparently," said Bernard. "But then, blue or pink would suit my complexion equally well ; so I can't sympathize in your perplexity." But though his words were jesting, his face was grave and sad.

Bridget's second letter was from Blake. She ran her eye carelessly over it, and said half to herself, "Preachments, dear old fellow ! but I wish he had not taken up these notions." Then both letters were tucked in at the waist of her riding-habit, and the four walked quickly on towards the Hall.

I do not think it is possible to imagine a prettier or more home-like room than the sitting-room at the Hall. It always had an atmosphere of peace about it, and a fragrance as of newly-cut hay and lavender and rose-leaves.

It was always called a sitting-room, and the windows at the end opened into Aunt Bridget's garden. The drawing-room was long and low, and comparatively deserted, and opened by an ante-room into the hall, which was the old part of the house, and occupied a large portion of the original building under the heavy stone coping I have described.

The girls did not enter the house by this hall, but went round to a glass door, through which they passed with their cousin into the sitting-room.

"Well, madame!"—it was a fancy of Bridget's so to address Mrs. Rochemont. "Well, madame, here we are; a great incursion of Goths invading your peaceful territory. Take care, little Christine, or I shall upset that lovely erection of yours. What a splendid house it is!"

"It is the Castle of Rochemont, in Normandy. I found a picture of it, Cousin Bridget, in this book," said Christine, triumphantly showing an old-fashioned print—in a very old-fashioned annual—of Castle Rochemont.

"Oh, I see!" said Bridget; "and what delightful bricks those are! Bernard, does it not make you wish you were a child again?"

Bernard seemed very well pleased to devote

himself to Christine and the château, which was really built with great skill; while Bridget unfolded her plan of taking Claire to the wedding at Clifton.

"I must consult her father, Bridget. I cannot promise without his consent; it is a long journey—" mother paused. "If any of the girls went, it ought to be Janet. She is our eldest child—and representative."

"Mother, I would not go for anything," Janet interposed warmly; "but Claire would like it."

"Yes; and we shall be such a nice, cosy party, Bernard and I, and Claire and the bridegroom. All starting early from Wychester and sleeping in London, and then going down to Bristol the next day. It is nothing of a journey, Madame, in these railway days. We shall pick up Blake at Cambridge, I hope; but I am not quite sure of him. Oh! here is Cousin Gabriel."

The squire and his twin girls now came in together. Such a grand picture he was of a dignified middle-aged English gentleman. His figure was tall and well-built, his complexion clear and ruddy; and his plentiful hair, sprinkled with grey, was swept back from a fine round forehead. Bridget sprang forward to prefer her request, when she stopped suddenly. A stranger was behind the twins, and now came forward.

"My dear," the squire said, addressing his wife, "this is our new Rector, Mr. Miles. I have begged him to return and take a place at our binner-table."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Rochemont, with the gentle stateliness of manner which characterised her, and seemed to suit so well with her title in the village of "Madame Rochemont"—"Indeed, I bid you welcome, Mr. Miles; and I am so glad to find you mean to live amongst us. We have not, as you know, had the advantage of a resident clergyman for many years."

"I know it, and I am most anxious to fill the long-vacant place to the best of my ability. Short as has been my residence in East Repton, I have already heard my people speak of their best friend, 'Madame Rochemont.'"

The colour rose in Mrs. Rochemont's pale, sweet face, as she answered, "It is but little I can do, or have done. Our people have been as sheep without a shepherd; our poor old Rector died in peace, I trust?"

"Yes, as he had lived in his room at Trinity, surrounded by his books, and seldom going outside the College walls. He was a great age—nearly ninety; and infirmities gathered round him and weighed heavily at times."

The squire now broke in:

"Here, sir, are more of the Rochemonts. My young cousin Bridget, from the Cottage; and my two eldest and my youngest daughters. Mr. Wentworth, too, who claims cousinship with Bride here. She is generally to be seen in her riding-habit, and East Repton would stand still without her."

"Please, Cousin Gabriel, don't give me my character, as if I were a maid wanting a place."

"At the Rectory!" said the squire, with a hearty, sonorous laugh. "Very well, Bride, you can speak for yourself, I know. Mr. Miles will soon find that out."

Mr. Miles did not laugh at this sally, but looked at Bridget calmly, with his deep-set observing eyes.

"Just as if I were a rare specimen," she said to Bernard, as they retraced their steps to the Cottage together. "I am disappointed in the Rector," Bridget continued; "he looks like a dry book-worm, after all. However, he is better than the succession of curates, who have neglected the parish in the old professor's non-residence. He has got something in him, I think, and will drop that chrysalis shell, when he knows us better, perhaps. Bernard!" she said abruptly, as he stood with the gate of the drive in his hand to let her pass, "Bernard! what is the matter! That letter has put you out."

"That letter!" he repeated, somewhat sharply. "Are you dying of curiosity to read it?"

The girl's eyes flashed for a moment; and then, could Bernard have seen them, he would have seen a dimness putting out the light, and lying presently in drops upon the long curled lashes.

"You have been here two days," she said presently; "and I, who know you so well, know something is troubling you. If I could help you by advice or sympathy, as I once could, I should be glad."

Bernard gave a low whistle, and walked steadily on in silence. His step was firm and decided; he was a well-knit, muscular man, perhaps under the average height, but carrying himself so erect that he looked taller than he really was. His features were well cut, and his brow low and square. A thick dark moustache—less commonly worn in those days than now, except by men in the army—hid a mouth which gave the expression to the whole face. When Bernard smiled, and those closely-set lips showed a row of regular teeth, the effect was pleasant. But Bernard's smile was not too frequent; and when his mouth was in repose, it was somewhat too stern and unyielding in expression. "Mr. Bernard is so masterful," old Hickes, the factotum and general man-servant, said that evening at the Cottage. "He is so masterful, that when he is harnessing Snowdrop she is like a dumb thing with no spirit; and when I'm grooming of her, or that scamp Tom tries to fasten the girth, she kicks with her fore-leg here and hind-leg there, and champs and fumes as if she was a mad thing. Snowdrop, she *is* a vixen to every one but Master Bernard; but there, he'd master ten vixens, *he* would."

With all this, it may be doubted whether Bernard had yet altogether mastered himself. There were times when his temper took those about him by surprise. He would show it, not by a torrent of words or angry recriminations, but by a dark lowering of his brow and a curl of his lip and a set of his shoulders, which was hardly

to be called a shrug, but made Bridget say she knew by Bernard's back what mood he was in.

Bernard Wentworth had the fortune or misfortune to be the possessor of five hundred a year, and to be what is called independent of any profession; that is, there was no absolute necessity for exertion. He had lost both father and mother early in life; and his father's sister, Mrs. Rochemont, was his nearest relative. He had been at a public school and to Oxford, and then he had travelled for two years; and here he was, at six-and-twenty, with, as every one thought, no fixed purpose in life, and yet all the time revolving in his mind many plans for the future. As a school-boy and young Oxford man he had spent a great deal of time at the Old Bank House, at Wycheater, where the Rochemonts then lived during the winter months, occupying the Cottage only in the summer.

There it was that Bernard Wentworth had been associated with Bridget from early boyhood, though it was not till they established a correspondence during his travels that any very especial tie existed between them. And now that tie was undefined. Bridget was more to Bernard than a sister or a cousin; and yet he had never made the most distant reference to a future which she would share, or written or spoken what could be called any profession of love. Mrs. Rochemont was too indolent and easy-going to trouble herself much about it, and indeed Bridget was in all respects so entirely her own mistress, that her mother never thought of interfering with her con-

cerns. Once, Ambrose startled his mother a little by saying;

"Is Bridget engaged to Bernard Wentworth, mother? These huge letters once a week look like it."

"Engaged! My dear Ambrose, they are cousins. Bridget would not dream of such a thing, I don't think Bridget will marry; she is very happy as she is."

"Well," Ambrose had said, "cousins have married before now; and the Rochemonts have been rather given that way. But it is no concern of mine, I suppose," for Ambrose had something of his mother's *laissez aller*, and was not fond of giving himself needless trouble.

But the position in which Bridget found herself was a dangerous one, and she was beginning to mistrust herself. As she walked down the shady drive with her cousin she felt that there was a gulf between them, and that he lived a life after all apart from her.

"I should tell you, Bernard, if anything worried me," she said, after a pause.

"How do you know anything has worried me?" he asked. "You are so fond of jumping at conclusions."

"I can understand signs, especially your signs; and ever since you have been here this time, I have noticed something was wrong. Your letters too, lately, have been—well, not what they once were. I tell you all I care about—and you never

respond as you did; and altogether there is a change."

Bernard set his mouth in a still firmer line, and said, not very pleasantly: "Change! you don't want one letter to be the precise copy of another, do you—that would be very dull work. But I want you to do something for me, Bride. Get me out of this wedding at Clifton. Find Ambrose another best man, and set me free."

"It would be impossible," Bridget said eagerly. "There are few enough from our side of the house as it is; and here is Blake writing and saying he will not come because he thinks it worldly, and that as there is a dance in the evening he should consider it positively wrong to be present."

"How tiresome every one is!" Bridget exclaimed, as she sprang up the little winding staircase at the Cottage, and locking herself in her own little room, threw herself on her bed and lay there in her riding-habit till the bell rang for tea.

Then she started up, and with incredible swiftness divested herself of her habit, smoothed her wavy brown hair, and "got herself," as she would have expressed it, into a white muslin with black bows, and appeared all bright and self-possessed to make tea and dispense to Bernard from the side-board a glass of her father's old brown sherry, to give a relish to his plate of ham and hot toast.

Bernard melted under the sunny influence of his cousin, and the evening passed pleasantly enough in looking over some photographs—which

fifteen or sixteen years ago were considered as great treasures—of Rome, Florence, and Venetian palaces and churches.

Ten o'clock struck from the little old-fashioned French clock on the mantelpiece, and Bridget rang the bell, a summons presently answered by another bell and the opening of the drawing-room door by the upper servant, Katherine.

Then Bridget led the way into a little square hall, where the small household assembled, Hickes and Tom bringing up the rear; and opening a Prayer-Book, she read the psalms, with her congregation. Then followed a prayer from a small book of devotion, in a clear sweet voice.

There was not the living coal from the altar in Bridget's religion; but she went through this form regularly, and never allowed anything to interfere with morning and evening prayers in the family. Her father had never done so, and she felt herself his representative; and having once marked out for herself a line of action, she was strict in following it. It was with Bridget as with many others—"so far and no farther"—as regarded religion. She looked upon it as a sort of safeguard and defence; but as yet the blessed loving spirit of the Lord was unknown to her. To check hard judgments, to soften asperities, to bring the whole soul into communion with the Spirit of holiness and peace, to walk ever in the presence of one who was unseen but near—all this was a sealed book to her and made her impatient with her brother Blake, who was at this time in all the freshness and

fervour of a new-found treasure, of which he spoke much, and not always wisely, to his relatives and friends.

Fired with burning zeal, and with no very marked mental gifts, Blake looked too much on his own things and too little on the things of others. There was a self-engrossment in him which might mar his influence, and on which the world would not look too leniently. He had the habit, very common with the young men of his school of thought, of ignoring all efforts for good which were not made precisely in the way which he thought the right one. He had, as he said to Bridget in the letter which she read more carefully for the second time in her own room that night, come out from the mass of the ungodly, and desired to keep separate. If he attended his brother's wedding he should compromise himself; and he could not do it.

It did not strike Blake that he might do much more by influence, by personal example, by cheerful acknowledgment of his allegiance to his Master *in* the world, than by continually shunning society and shutting himself out of it; and that he would never win a strong, self-reliant nature, like his sister's, by writing long letters full of doctrine in which he said little of the practice of the faith and abounding charity the unfailing result of his Master's teaching.

Fair and pale, and languid in movement, and with a slow, musical utterance, Blake Rochemont possessed a charm for many. His delicate health

and feeble constitution had kept him back from all manly games and exercises, which is ever a great loss to young manhood. Susceptible and imaginative, Blake fell into the hands of an earnest man, somewhat older than himself, in his first year at Cambridge, and embraced eagerly the same opinions with greater fervour and less discretion than his teacher. His mother always called him "her poor dear Blake," and looked fondly at his delicate features and masses of curly brown hair which shadowed a pale, somewhat narrow brow. "If Blake had only been the girl and Bridget the boy," she would say, "Bridget would have made some mark in the world; while poor dear Blake is unfitted to meet its trials and roughnesses. He would have been so happy at home with me; and I should have loved to have his gentle, tender care."

Mrs. Rochemont was quite wrong. Blake and his mother, without Bridget's guiding hand, would soon have made shipwreck and got into trouble.

CHAPTER II.

GAIN AND LOSS.

'For he that wrongs his friend,
Wrongs himself more; and ever bears about
A silent court of justice in his breast;
Himself the judge and jury, and himself
The prisoner at the bar—ever condemn'd.'

TENNYSON.

ACCORDING to the recognised code of social laws by which we have all in our turn to rule our-

selves on certain occasions, No. 16, Hibernian Place, Clifton, was turned topsy-turvy the night before the wedding of Maude Inglis.

In the narrow entrance-hall were piles of boxes, hampers, flowers, plants, parcels, small and great, amongst which waiters were running excitedly; and Mrs. Lennard's sedate man-servant was so bewildered that he could scarcely find his way to the door when the fly containing the bridegroom and his sister, and his cousin Bernard Wentworth, drove up. For permission had been given to Claire to join the party, and she was in a state of quiet delight, mingled with some shyness, at the prospect.

Everything was new to her and full of interest, and she was not insensible to the charms of the bridesmaid's dress, which, as Bridget had foretold, suited her admirably. Ambrose and Bernard were to sleep at the hotel in the Mall, and the two boxes containing the young ladies' dresses were deposited on the pavement.

"I must come in and introduce you," Ambrose said; "though I scarcely know how we are to effect an entrance."

"No, indeed, sir," said old Sanderson; "and it's the same everywhere. They are laying the breakfast in the dining-room, and we dine in the sitting-room, to-night. Please to take care you don't fall, ma'am, over that loose matting," the man continued to Bridget, as he led the way to the foot of the staircase, and conducted the guests to the drawing-room. Here the aspect of things

was scarcely better: loose papers, notes, presents, gloves, and flowers were scattered in wild confusion, while at the writing-table in the back drawing-room sat a lady with a sharp outline of feature, in a stiff black silk which rustled as she rose to meet Ambrose.

"You will forgive all this confusion, Mr. Rochemont. For my part, I think it would be better if people walked out in an ordinary dress and were married in peace; but of course, as Colonel Inglis held such a good position, it *was* necessary in Maude's case. I am delighted to see Miss Rochemont, I am sure, and Miss Claire Rochemont; and this is your brother——"

"No; my cousin, Mr. Wentworth," Ambrose said. "Blake did not feel able to accept your kind invitation."

"He is very delicate, I fear," Mrs. Lennard said, "and weddings are a great excitement and fatigue; and it is all your fault, you naughty person"—addressing Ambrose—"as I have been telling Maude. Now I must show the young ladies their rooms—only a wee-wee dressing-room for one; but we are so packed, for Sir Henry and Lady Roberts are here, and of course they take up a great deal of room, and spacious as these houses look they are not accommodating—far from it. Now don't linger, Ambrose," continued Mrs. Lennard, "you won't see *her* till dinner-time; she is quite worn out, and is resting. She hates the fuss as much as you do; but then, as I tell her, she must remember what is due to her

father's memory, and what would his old friend Sir Henry have thought if we had done the thing shabbily? I said to Mr. Lennard, remembering my poor brother's position, 'We must do it well.'

Mr. Lennard, whose opinions were thus quoted, now appeared; a little wiry man, who followed a lucrative calling in Bristol, and was far more at home in his office there than in Hibernian Place. He had paid a dear penalty for the honour Miss Inglis had done him by marrying him, late in life, and bringing with her the orphan child of her brother who had died in India soon after his wife, and left his child and her small fortune to his only sister's care. Mrs. Lennard had no nobility in her nature, and she never let her husband forget for an instant that her family accounted itself superior to his. It was her constant and wearisome habit to extol the greatness of the Inglis family, and to catch at the very ghost of a title which might be connected with them. Clifton was ready to foster this habit rather than to discourage it. If her friends complained sometimes of the perpetual dragging into the conversation of "Lord Sandstone, whose daughter married my cousin," or of "the Earl of Bilberry, who was related to my dear sister-in-law, Maude's mother"—on the whole they felt a sort of reflected lustre, and Mrs. Lennard held her own in the society of the place.

Ambrose Rochemont met Mrs. Lennard and Maude at an hotel in Switzerland, where excursions and daily intercourse at hotels furthered Mrs.

Lennard's views. She caught the name of Rochemont at once as a good one. She burrowed amongst the landed gentry rolls for Ambrose's pedigree, and was soon convinced that Maude could not do better. Maude was quiet, gentle, and retiring, and in her aunt's power. She thought it wonderful that Ambrose should care for her; and yet was pleased and flattered by his love. She was passive rather than active in the preparations for her marriage; and Bridget was to have another added to the list of those who deferred to her judgment and acknowledged her supremacy.

"I am afraid of Bridget," the bride said to Ambrose on the evening before the wedding; "she is so clever, and I so stupid. I am frightened when I think of all the large party at East Repton. I know I shall like the winter best, when we shall live in Wycheater."

"Oh, you will get on splendidly," said Ambrose. "They will all admire you. Claire said, just now, she had no idea I had won such a sweet, lovely wife. You are too good for us, Maude," he added fondly.

"Ah! you cannot mean that," she answered; "but I know you will take care of me, and so I will try not to be afraid."

Ambrose laughed.

"Why, one would think you were going to live amongst the Maori tribes at least. You will like every one, especially Madame Rochemont, as the people in the village call her. She is wonder-

fully good, like you, and goes about amongst the poor, and all that."

This short *tête-à-tête* came suddenly to an end, as Maude was called away to try on the last arrival of the trousseau, and Ambrose was sent into the back drawing-room, where Claire was tying up favours.

"I like her so much, Ambrose," she said; "she is so pretty and gentle. Such lovely eyes, and such a sweet voice."

"Yes; her voice first attracted me," Ambrose said; "and she never uses slang words."

"Slang words! what do you mean?"

"Oh! I forgot, they are unknown at the Hall; but some girls, you know, Claire, call everything 'awfully jolly,' or 'disgusting,' and talk of being 'sold,' and 'out of it,' and a lot more things like that."

"Oh, I know now what you mean; like the Miss Parkers, our neighbours at Felstone. No; Maude is very different to them."

"It's a pity Blake would not come to the wedding. I feel it very hard, that I have two brothers, and neither of them present."

A bright colour rose to Claire's face as she said in a low voice, "Yes, it is a pity."

"Poor Anthony seems to have passed out of one's hemisphere, and I doubt if we ever see him again; but Blake, who is such an affectionate, kind-hearted fellow, I do feel his absence. I expect, Claire, if *you* had asked him he would have come," Ambrose said.

Claire stooped to pick up some white satin ribbon, and made no reply. Blake and his concerns were not to be discussed lightly, and Ambrose perceived that she did not wish to say any more about them.

The church was crowded the next morning, for Mrs. Lennard had taken care that none of her "circle" should fail to be acquainted with the day and hour of her niece's marriage.

I need not describe the appearance of the bride or bridesmaids, or tell how Lady Roberts was resplendent in lilac moire, and Mrs. Lennard in grey satin, nor how the bridegroom was pronounced to be the most distinguished-looking man, and the best man scarcely inferior to him.

All this was recorded in the Clifton papers of the day, which proclaimed the marriage of Maude, only daughter of the late Colonel Inglis, of her Majesty's 50th Regiment, to Ambrose Rochemont of East Repton, in magniloquent terms. The exhibition and labelling of presents was not in those days one of the inexorable social laws to which obedience must be granted: therefore a long list of articles of plate and jewellery and ornaments which were received by the bride and bridegroom did not follow; but the paper duly set forth the *recherché* character of the breakfast, and that Mr. and Mrs. Lennard gave a ball in the evening, at which a large number of the leading families in the place were present.

Claire was as happy as Bridget expected. She looked her best, and watched with some

amazement the rapid step of the *Deux temps*, wondering what her mother and Janet would say to it. Bernard Wentworth went about doing his duty as best man among the bridesmaids, and apparently enjoying himself.

Towards the end of the evening Lady Roberts came bearing down upon Bridget with a question which made her start, from its abruptness :

"Was Mr. Wentworth in Florence last winter, Miss Rochemont?"

"Yes, I think he was," Bridget said ; adding, truthfully, "I know he was."

"Ah ! then I am not mistaken," Lady Roberts said. "He is a very handsome man, most aristocratic in appearance." Bridget waited to hear if more would follow ; but apparently Lady Roberts was satisfied, for she turned away the next minute and said no more.

"Lady Roberts has been inquiring about you, Bernard," Bridget said a few minutes later, when she followed Bernard on to the balcony, where several people were breathing the fresh air after the heated atmosphere of the crowded drawing-rooms. "She seems to take a great interest in you. Do you know why?"

"No ; unless it is that I am Ambrose's best man. But Bride, I am tired of this day. I wish it would come to an end ; it was cruel of you not to get me off."

"You know it was impossible—I could not do it."

"You could do it for Blake," he said.

"Blake did it for himself," she replied; "and besides, I respect his scruples. He is most thoroughly in earnest, poor boy; and I am always thinking, after all, we may envy him some day."

"Speak for yourself, Bridget. Though, to be sure, you are not in much danger of turning fanatic. You are far too clear-headed for that; it is a mistake that you were not the masculine head of the family."

"I don't like you to say that, Bernard." Bridget said, with a thrill of pain in her voice; "it implies that I am not womanly, and I don't think," she added with warmth, "that you would have said that to me a year ago. You are changed, and I feel it."

"Changed!" Bernard repeated. "I wish you would not always strike the same note. I am tired of hearing it. And I don't know what you mean."

"Then you shall know, once for all. Ever since you were at Florence last winter you have altered. Your letters have been so stiff and formal, and you never really tell me what you are, thinking about or what interests you. You snub me if I try to write or talk of anything you do, or think of doing. You shut me out in the cold Bernard; and what have I done to deserve it?"

Bernard drew himself up to his full height, and said slowly but bitterly:

"You have been making a mistake about me, that is all. I am not what you have thought me all these years. You have been a great deal too

good to me, Bridget," he added more gently; "and I wish I were worthier."

Bridget turned to look at her cousin as he leaned over the balcony, which was hung with coloured lamps, one burning brightly above him, so that she could see his face. Something like a revelation came to her in that minute. Bernard was unhappy, not cross; he was rough to her because he was in pain. The wall of division that had been rising up between them had its foundation deep in some hidden trouble of which she knew nothing. Bridget's position was one to try any woman to the utmost. Bernard and she had shared thoughts and sympathies; he had talked and written to her on every possible subject, with all that pleasant confidence of friendship which, if once broken, is so hard to regain.

"Yes," he repeated; "you have been a great deal too good to me. I cannot say any more."

"You don't want me to write to you?" she asked, in a low voice; "you think——"

It seemed impossible to put the thoughts into words; and Bridget felt a thrill of deep humiliation, which to her proud spirit was indeed pain. Bernard bit his under lip, and she saw his hand was firmly closed round the ledge of the balcony.

"Don't ask me what I think," he said. "I never intended to give you pain, or to hurt you. But I know you too well to doubt that you would rather have an honest confidence than a half honest one. I am in great difficulty and perplexity, and I want to do something at once to increase my

income. I used to think, as you know, that I would take up my degree and go to the Bar; but that is such a long process. I am therefore trying to sink my capital in a manufacturing concern, and look after a business in Somersetshire. If it succeeds I am going to be married."

"Who is she?" Bridget asked, and there was no tremor in her voice now.

"She is only a governess to some rich people I met at Florence; very poor, very friendless, and very beautiful. Not clever, or brilliant, as you would say; but——well, I saved her life to begin with, by plunging into a lake after her, and she was overwhelmed with gratitude, poor child."

"What is her name?" Bridget asked, in the same cold, hard voice.

"Ida Morison. Her father was a clergyman in the north of England. When he died, there was not a farthing, and she had to go and earn her bread."

"I hope she will make you happy," Bridget said. "Now I think we have cooled ourselves, and ought to return to our duties. There is one thing more. Do you wish this engagement of yours to be kept secret?"

"I would rather not have it talked about, please. If all goes well, I shall go out for her in the autumn; but there is no use in letting my affairs be discussed by the whole clan of Rochemonts. Bridget——"

But he spoke to the coloured lamps, for Bridget was gone. He looked for her as the rooms thinned and the guests dropped off; then he heard Claire say she did not think Bridget was well, for she was gone to bed.

That night was one of deep searchings of heart to Bridget. She had received a blow, under which a woman alway suffers. She had all unconsciously given Bernard so much, and, as it seemed to her, he had taken so much from her of her best—and now he had left her bankrupt. Still, she reasoned, who was to blame but herself? He was her cousin, and the friendship between them had sprung up from circumstance. She had no complaint to make; this Ida was fair and beautiful and friendless, and it was chivalrous of him to take her and befriend her. And was it not natural that he should do so? But that moment when the conviction is forced upon us that one for whom we would do everything—one who has taken a place in our very innermost heart—sets little store by all our love and care, even likes better to be without it—is a bitter moment to most of us. Many have tasted the bitterness who can confess it to no earthly ear, who have to hide it from all human eyes, and keep it as a sad secret to their graves. There is a balm for this wound, there is a Physician who can heal it; but Bridget as yet knew Him not, and her soul refused comfort.

So she set herself to face her trouble unaided, and her brave strong nature helped her. But it was a sore conflict, and many weaker women, who have committed their way to God, and cast their burden on Him, have fared better in the battle than the bright, self-reliant, true-hearted Bridget Rochemont.

"My dear," Lady Roberts said the next day, "there was a story at Florence last winter that that charming Mr. Wentworth had engaged himself to a governess in the family of Lady Montserat. She was a lovely girl—perfectly lovely—but with no means, and Lady Montserat keeps her out of pure charity. I dare say, like most reports of the kind, it is quite untrue about Mr. Wentworth. Such a man as he is would look higher than a governess for a wife. I do really think he is one of the handsomest men I ever saw. Is he your first cousin, Miss Rochemont?"

"His father was my mother's half brother," Bridget said, shortly.

Then Lady Roberts proceeded to discuss the events of the day before, and Bridget's cross-examination was over for that day—a day of discomfort long to be remembered; for the house was all in confusion, and the rain falling heavily prevented an excursion to Penpold Point, which had been planned, and Mrs. Lennard's temper and spirits were not at their best, in consequence. Claire made herself happy with two of the bridesmaids, and no one knew or guessed the pain at Bridget's heart. About five o'clock there was a little clearance, and a walk was proposed. Every one scampered upstairs to dress, and Bridget with the rest. But when the party had passed the Observatory Hill, and looked down on the muddy river, and across to the woods wreathed in mist, which showed vivid patches of green through the thin shadowy veil, Bridget separated herself from

the others, and walked away alone at her own rapid pace.

Only a week ago!—only yesterday! she thought, and how natural it would have been to say to Bernard, "Let us have a good walk and talk together;" and how gladly she would have gone over that wide expanse of smooth turf with him; sure that the pleasure to him would be as great as to her—and now!

She turned once, when on a slight ascent beyond the turnpike of those days, which separated Clifton Down from Durdham Down—she saw his erect figure by the side of one of the merry, laughing bridesmaids, walking with the firm, steadfast tread which Bridget would have recognised anywhere. Bernard lost to her—Bernard gone—it was this which she could not realise.

And then she quickened her pace, and was well on to the sea-wall before the rest of the party had crossed the road. Some words from a familiar poem recurred to her:

"For pain and grief are transitory things, no less than joy:
Although they leave us not the men they find us,
Yet they *do* leave us."

"It will pass," she thought. "I shall get on very well. No one need ever know—not mother, or Cousin Grace, or anybody—but oh! I did think myself so strong and so far above such weakness. What *is* the matter with me?"

For as she gained the sea-wall and rested against a rough block of stone which cropped up

there, her eyes filled with tears, and before she could control herself she was sobbing bitterly. The tears had their way, and then with a strong effort Bridget recovered herself, and when Claire's voice sounded near her, she looked up with a smile.

"How beautiful these rocks are!" Claire said. "How I wish mother could see them! There is nothing like this in our part of the world. Do look at the Welsh mountains, Bride!"

"Yes! that is a lovely view. Don't you remember Mr. Miles told us to be sure to go to the sea-wall at Clifton."

"Walk back with me, Bridget. I don't like to see you all alone; and I do wonder Mr. Wentworth can prefer that silly Miss Ross's company to yours."

"Tastes differ," Bridget said lightly; "but let us move off before the others overtake us. Some have turned homewards already, I see."

Claire was surprised when her cousin put her hand within her arm, and said, tenderly:

"Dear little Claire, I am glad you came; I hope you have enjoyed it?"

"Yes," Claire said; "I have enjoyed it very much. Dancing is so nice, Bridget; and I did like to watch all those people last night. I only hope it is not wrong."

"Nonsense, Claire; that is Blake's teaching. You must not let him rule you in everything."

"If only we were half as good as Blake is," Claire said. "But I am afraid he is wearing himself out now; and what will it be when he is or-

dained? He will kill himself. He wants to go out to Africa as a missionary, and the climate would be dreadful for him."

"You are in Blake's confidence, Claire," Bridget said.

"Yes; that is, he has written two or three times since Easter, about religious things chiefly. I showed the letters to mother," Claire added quickly. "She is very fond of Blake."

"Everybody must be fond of him, poor fellow," Bridget said. "I only trust he will not dream away his life in theories and views and opinions."

"I don't think Blake will do that," Claire said, warmly; "he is so anxious to get to work, and preach to the heathen."

"Yes, preach," Bridget said; "he preaches now to poor and rich, young and old, rather too much, poor fellow. However, whe shall see."

"I feel, Bridget," Claire said, with some hesitation, "that we all *do* want something beyond what the world can give us. Everything passes away, and people see what they love best taken, and then——well, we may do without God while we are young and happy; but though I feel that, if I loved Him as Blake does I should be even happier than I am *now*. I know I should still be happy even if I were old and ill or sad—if I felt Him quite near, and knew I loved Him."

"Maude will suit you, then," said Bridget, rather coldly; "that is her way of thinking too."

"Is it?" Claire asked—then she went on: "Do you know, Bride, Blake's great desire and prayer

is to find Anthony, and he means to do all he can to bring him back to be good and different from what he is."

"Anthony chose his own way," Bridget said. "Again and again my dear father forgave and received him, but it was hopeless. I try to forgive him—but it is hard; for I do believe he broke my father down, and so he fell an easy prey to disease. I am not hard on him, I don't wish to be hard, but he has tried us all so terribly."

Then the two girls walked on silently, and when they spoke again, it was of a visit they were to pay to a friend of the family in London, before they returned to East Repton.

A month later—when summer had reached its full prime, the Vicar of East Repton was striding over the low range of hills between East Repton and Rolleston, lost in the meditations to which he was prone. He rejoiced in nature, and read the fair book open before him as written by the finger of God. He had keen sympathies with every living thing, and stopped suddenly in his walk to stoop and pick up a poor heavily laden bee which was lying on its back on the path over the hills. When he had tenderly and gently conveyed it to a place of safety, he heard a sound of light footsteps, and Bridget Rochemont overtook him.

"Good-afternoon," Mr. Miles said, raising his hat. "You are not often to be met on foot, Miss Rochemont."

"No; I prefer Daisy's back as a rule; but I

have lent her to Claire to-day. She has gone out riding with Blake; and anything that makes him take exercise is good for him. Janet is riding the Hall pony, and I hope they will get back safely."

"Your brother looks very ill," Mr. Miles said, "and I wish he would take more recreation; it is a grand mistake to linger over books all day, in this glorious weather too, and in this free open country. I love a plain," Mr. Miles said, looking round on the level panorama which stretched round them, and of which their slight elevation on the low heathery hills gave them a fine view. "If I could choose, I should live in a flat country—so I ought to be satisfied."

"I am glad you like our East country," said Bridget; "but after Cambridge life it must be so dull for you."

"Dull!" and Mr. Miles laughed. "That is a word I don't admit into my vocabulary, Miss Rochemont; I have too much to do to be dull."

"You are writing a book, are you not?" Bridget asked.

"Half-a-dozen," he replied, with a laugh. "I have been arranging sea-weeds the last week, however—getting my aquarium into order—besides writing my sermons. I find these people want very plain words; and it is by no means easy to be plain without being commonplace, and simple without being childish."

"I like your sermons," Bridget said; "they

have helped me a great deal of late, when I wanted it."

Mr. Miles looked down at the slight figure by his side, and as he caught the outline of Bridget's profil and firm, determined mouth, he wondered a little that she should want help.

"I don't listen to sermons as a rule," she said honestly; "but yours have a breath of fresh air about them, and—— I am very impertinent to talk to you like this, I am afraid," she broke off suddenly.

"Very! I like such impertinence, however; it is not every one who speaks plainly, you know. You will come, I hope, to the schoolroom on Tuesday evening, when I am going to talk to the people, if they will listen, about the stars."

"Stars and sea-weed alternately?" Bridget said.

"Yes; the same loving Hand made both, orders both—the one scarcely less wonderful than the other, with the myriads of life below the water of which it speaks. I have made a rough sketch of some diagrams—big pictures, you know—to hang up behind me while I am talking; but I am a poor draftsman."

"My sister-in-law at High Bank House draws beautifully. I am sure if you ask her she will be delighted to help you. I don't think Janet and Claire would be of any use. They cannot draw any better than I can. Have you seen the bride yet?"

"Yes; I paid my respects to her last week.

She is very gentle and winning, and very pretty. Your brother may be accounted a happy man."

"Yes. Maude is very nice and pleasant, but rather too quiet, I think. We are somewhat tame here as it is, and we wanted life and energy to wake us up. My brother lives in the Bank House at Wycheater in the winter; in the summer months he likes the frequent rides to and from the city, as my father did. An elder brother of my father lives in the Bank House; he has rooms there all the year round—Uncle Anthony; he is an old bachelor."

"I feel as if I should never analyse and classify the Rochemonts," Mr. Miles said, laughing. "Fresh members are so continually turning up."

"Yes, we are a numerous clan," Bridget said, "what with elder and younger branches and marriages and inter-marriages."

"I don't know that I ever saw a finer specimen of a country gentleman than our squire, and Madame Rochemont with that bevy of fair daughters round her is a wonderfully attractive picture; which reminds me," he said, looking at his watch, "that I must go and see a poor fellow in whom she is interested who is dying, out at the other end of the parish. I was with him at six o'clock, and promised to return."

"Six o'clock this morning!" Bridget exclaimed.

"Why not? And it was a morning to remember, I can tell you; everything instinct with the fulness of life, and that poor boy cut down by lingering disease—the contrast was great."

"What is his name?" asked Bridget.

"Aston, Edwin Aston; he is not a native of this place."

"Oh, yes! I remember, he is at Wick Farm. Madame has been very good to him."

"Very—as to all the sick and sad and sorrowful. Madame Rochemont's help is everywhere!"

"Yes," Bridget said; "and how little she talks about it. It is this which makes me love her; she says so much less than she does."

"That is a good definition of an honest worker," Mr. Miles said.

"I am not religious," Bridget said, after a pause, "but I do admire religion, as I see it in Madame for instance. I always feel her to be so good, and trust her with all my heart. I wish poor Blake would imitate her: but he actually sets himself up to her, and took her to task last evening, when we were there, about a book on the table, in a very arrogant way."

"Arrogant!" Mr. Miles said; "that is the last adjective I should apply to Blake."

"Well, it is arrogant, for a young man of his age to speak in that way to a woman like Madame, who is simply as near perfection as any one ever was; and then I am not at all the person to do Blake any good. I get angry with him, and he thinks me dreadfully wicked."

Mr. Miles made no rejoinder, and they walked on in silence.

Presently Bridget said, "Will you come in to the High Bank House and see Maude about the diagrams?"

"No, not this afternoon. I must go to the Wyck Farm; but I shall be very glad to talk to Mrs. Ambrose Rochemont about it to-morrow. If you can tell her something of my plan first, it will make my request appear less bold."

"Im am going to see her now," Bridget said, pausing at the gate of the High Bank House: "so good-bye."

Mr. Miles took the hand Bridget held out to him, and said—

"You spoke of not being religious just now. Do not forget that the longing of our hungry souls can never be satisfied till we go to the Great Fountain of living water."

Bridget's brightest colour rose to her expressive face, but she said in a low voice—

"Thank you. I will not forget what you say. Good-bye."

CHAPTER III.

PLANS AND PROPOSALS.

"Love is a thing to walk with hand in hand
Through the every-dayness of this work-day world—
Baring its tender feet to every roughness,
Yet letting not one heart-beat go astray
From Beauty's law of plainness and content.
A simple fireside thing, whose quiet smile
Can warm earth's poorest hovel to a home
Which, when our autumn cometh, as it must,
And Life in the chill wind shivers bare and leafless,
Shall still be blest with Indian-summer youth
In bleak November."

J. R. LOWELL.

THE High Bank House was the least pretentious

of the three homes. Its name was at first sight inappropriate; for though it stood on a level higher than the Cottage and the Hall, the garden sloped down from the road to the door, and the ground rose on either side in banks which were a tangle of low bushes and flowering shrubs. The windows were wide and low, with small panes, and within were deep recesses, which relieved the monotony of the square rooms. Above the door, and entered from the upper story, was a sort of wide balcony, which was, however, roofed in and boarded at the sides, and was a feature of the High Bank House.

Here Ambrose Rochemont had made a quaint bower for his bride. Her little sitting-room opened into this balcony; and he had filled it with flowers, and placed in it a little crimson-covered chair and table, and covered the floor with a dainty carpet strewn with a pattern of leaves and buds.

It was the first time that the square balcony had been utilised. It had been considered a blot, rather than otherwise, in the appearance of the High Bank House; and the key of the door opening on the landing had been so seldom put into the lock that it was rusty with want of use. The bright idea of closing this door in the landing and opening one into the adjoining room had been Bridget's; and she thought how successful she had been, when she looked up at the balcony this afternoon, and saw Maude seated there, the western sunshine gleaming on her fair hair, and making it look like gold, while the shadow of the clematis

and honeysuckle branches flickered upon the folds of her white dress.

Maude rose as she heard the click of the gate, and coming to the railing before her, leaned over and smiled.

"Come up, Bridget; it is so cool and pleasant here."

Bridget obeyed, and was greeted by her sister-in-law with a kiss of welcome.

"I am expecting Ambrose soon," she said. "He will stay over Sunday;" and the eyes of the wife of six weeks glistened with delight.

"Do you find it very dull, Maude?" Bridget asked. "I ought to have come in this morning, but a desire possessed me to take a long walk, and I have only just returned from Rollestone."

"What a walk!" Maude said. "You are so strong and energetic, Bridget. I saw Blake and Claire and Janet ride past. I wondered you were not with them."

"I preferred walking to-day. What little books are these, Maude?"

"They are some Blake gave me."

Bridget took up one and looked at it rather scornfully.

"Tracts; that is a sort of literature I don't affect. They are all alike."

Maude coloured, but she said gently—

"These are very nice little books. Blake asked me to lend them to the people. I am going to take a few cottages for a district, if Mr. Miles will let me."

"That reminds me to tell you Mr. Miles is coming to ask you to help him to draw some diagrams for a lecture he is going to give in the schoolroom. I told him how well you could draw."

"I shall be very glad to help him if I can; but I never tried to draw any diagrams. Look at these cards, Bridget, and tell me about the people; most of them were left yesterday, when I was at the Hall."

"The Parkers: they live at Felstone Hall; they hunt, and are fast young women. They have no mother, and the father is old and infirm. The Stuarts; they are the people at North Repton: and think themselves very grand—Mrs. Stuart is an Honourable. Dacre: he is the clergyman there, a meek little man with a wife who rules him—and every one else if they will let her. What a business for you to return all these visits! And then there will be the Wycheester folk in October. I fancy you will like living in the old house there. Uncle Anthony is very unobtrusive, and keeps to his own rooms. Who did you see at the Hall yesterday?"

"They were all at home. They were very kind, and Mrs. Rochemont is so beautiful."

"Yes, her grey hair and dark eyes are striking. My brother Blake was there, I suppose, for we had none of his company at the Cottage. Why, there he is;" and as she spoke Blake appeared at the gate, and had soon joined Maude and Bridget in the balcony.

"How pale you look, Blake," was his sister's greeting. "You have a bruise on your forehead, Blake! What is the matter?"

"I had an awkward fall from the horse," Blake said; "it is only by God's mercy I am not more hurt; Snowdrop is surely very unsafe."

"Unsafe! I never heard such a thing, Blake. You must have been dreaming, and not caring where you went. How did it happen?"

"The horse stumbled coming down the hill the other side of Rollestone, and sent me over her head."

"And broke her knees?" asked Bridget anxiously.

"No. However, it is a solemn warning, and another proof that there is but a step between us and death."

Bridget gave a little impatient twist of her shoulders, and having assured herself that her brother was not really hurt, left him with Maude and ran away to examine the condition of Snowdrop's knees.

Old Hickes and Tom were both engaged in looking over the horse; and the Squire, who had heard of the accident from Claire and Janet, came up at the same time.

"I wonder how any one could manage to throw Snowdrop down," said the Squire. "I would have challenged all the cockneys in England to do it. What does the young fellow ride for, if he can't manage a quiet, steady-going mare like this?"

"Is she hurt, Cousin Gabriel?" asked Bridget. "What do you think?"

"No, I don't consider it serious; but keep her in the stable for a day or two, and bathe her fore-legs well with tepid water," the Squire said, turning to old Hickes. "Can I have a word you, Bridget?" the Squire continued. "Here, turn into the plantation with me."

"Won't you come in, Cousin Gabriel?" Bridget asked, with a thrill of anxious foreboding she could not have put into words.

"No, no; out of doors will be best;" and the Squire strode away from the Cottage towards the little white gate leading into the plantation, Bridget at his side.

"Shall we go in and see Cousin Anna, father?" Janet ran after them to ask.

"Yes, a good idea," the Squire said, holding the gate and letting Bridget pass him.

"It is that fellow Anthony again, Bride; he has been and done for himself this time."

"What has he done, Cousin Gabriel?" Bridget asked, her eyes flashing with curiosity and anger at the same time. "What has he done?"

"He is married!" said the Squire shortly, "and as a matter of course they are starving—the wife and the child."

"A child! then he has been married some time?"

"Yes; long before your poor father's death. But he has kept his secret well. I was never more surprised in my life."

"What bothers come from brothers!" said Bridget involuntarily. "I am sure two of mine are a perpetual trouble and anxiety. And does he tell you any more about himself, Cousin Gabriel?"

"Well, yes. You had better take the letter and read it to your mother. Of course I have told my wife all about it; not the girls. Would you like to talk it over with Madame, Bridget?" For the Squire saw the small hand tremble as Bride took the letter from him, glancing, as she did so, at the uphill, irregular writing.

"I have no patience with Anthony, Cousin Gabriel. Take his child, indeed, and his wife—while he goes off to San Francisco! Let them go with him; he must reap as he sows."

"That's hard doctrine, Bridget, isn't it? We must hold to our own flesh and blood. For my part, I am ready to help a Rochemont, and I will tell Cousin Anna so. Poor soul, I am sorry for her."

"Anthony helped to kill my father," Bridget said bitterly. "He broke the noblest heart that ever beat. I can never forgive that."

"Well, well," said Mr. Rochemont; "I have done my part in showing you the letter. I must go home to dinner now; I hear our bells ringing. Come up to the Hall to-morrow, and talk to Madame; she will know better what to advise than I do." And with a sonorous good-bye, the Squire strode away.

Bridget stood where he left her, in the middle of what was called the green drive, the wide path

through the plantation which went on till it came to the keeper's lodge at the farther end, and opened out into the Rollestone road. The Squire had turned into a narrow footpath towards the Hall, and Bridget was alone with the birds and the squirrels and all the countless forms of life with which the woods are ever filled.

The sun was making bands of gold across the long vista as it looked its farewell for the night. A little brown rabbit darted across close to Bridget, for she stood motionless as she read the unwelcome letter.

It was very badly and unevenly written. There were many protestations of sorrow for the past and promises for the future. But the sum of the whole matter was, that Anthony's wife was literally forlorn and friendless; that she was in such bad health, that if he attempted to take her out with him, she would die on the voyage; and he had got a splendid situation in some engineering enterprise; at least he was sure to get it when he arrived in San Francisco!

The expectation and the reality might strike other people as very different in their results; but not Anthony Rochemont. He believed what he said, as easy-going self-deceivers generally do believe in their assertions. And he intended to send for his wife and child as soon as he had received his first quarter's salary; or at any rate, he would send them money, to relieve others of the burden of their maintenance.

"Every one loves my poor Maria," he said; and as to the child, it is an angel. "Poor Maria would call it Antonia, after me. It is a pity the child should be named after such an unworthy father; and——"

Here Bridget broke off, with an impatient stamp of her small foot, and an exclamation uttered aloud.

"Nonsense! As if I could be taken in by such false professions. Oh, why do troubles always come together? Two years ago—two months ago—how different everything was!" And then Bridget crumpled up the unwelcome letter in her pocket, and hastened home to the Cottage.

Madame Rochemont was sitting in her own morning-room the next afternoon when Bridget's light step was heard on the short flight of stairs leading to it, and Christine, who was reading Mrs. Markham's History of England to her mother, exclaimed—

"Here comes Cousin Bride, mother."

"Put away your book, then, Christine," Mrs. Rochemont said, "and go and practise, as Janet told you."

Christine obeyed instantly, and ran off, after a kiss from Cousin Bride.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Cousin Grace," Bridget said; "but I knew I should have a quiet half-hour with you if I came this afternoon, because I hoped to find you alone. I knew they had all driven into Wycheater to-day, except

little Christine. You know what I am come about, Madame; tell me what we ought to do."

"Your brother's wife and child cannot be left to starve," Madame said, in her quiet, direct way. "What does your mother wish?"

"Oh, poor mother is flustered and worried, and does not know what to think; but," added Bridget honestly, "she will do as I like; she always does."

"And Blake and Ambrose?"

"I have not mentioned the subject to either of them. I dreaded a sermon from one, and a great outburst of indignation from the other. But is it not an intolerable thing that Anthony, after absoluteley forging my father's name, and behaving so disgracefully, should now calmly try to push his responsibilities upon us. Indeed, Madame, I cannot tell you what I feel for a man who can act in this way."

"Poor Bridget!" Madame said tenderly. "I am so sorry for you."

The words, simple in themselves, were spoken in a tone of such deep sympathy, that Bridget left her seat, and throwing herself down on the floor by Madame's side, laid her head upon her lap, as little Christine would have done, and cried bitterly.

"Everything has gone so wrong with me of late, Madame. My father's death in his prime, bowed down by Anthony's misdoings, was sad enough; then ever since there have been troubles. I used to have such entire faith in people; now I

am losing it, and it makes me miserable. Poor Blake, too, with all his vagaries and conceit and marvellously good opinion of himself, irritates me; and I often find myself saying what I do not really mean, just as a startling contrast to his doctrines."

"That is not right, dear Bride, is it? And may you not do much harm by anything like a scoffing tone about sacred things?"

"But when Blake takes you to task, for instance, as he did the other day, it is too much!"

"Blake is full of zeal and fervour," said Mrs. Rochemont. "He is in the freshness of his first love for God. And indeed, Bride, it is a blessed thing to feel that we have heard His own voice say unto our souls, 'I am thy salvation.' We cannot alter natural temperament; your brother is one who would be easily carried away by feelings. Be thankful that he has chosen this path instead of a worldly one, where he might have made great trouble. I have been talking about Blake this morning to some one else—you will understand who—my poor Claire. I fear her heart is given to him, and I do not think her father would wish this to go further."

"Has Blake been actually making love to her?" Bridget asked impatiently.

"Yes; I fear he has. We seem to live amidst and marry amongst our own people," Mrs. Rochemont said, with a smile. "It will be so with you too, Bride, will it not?"

Bridget started, as if she had been suddenly hurt.

"No, Cousin Grace; certainly not. What do you mean?" Then in a softer tone she went on: "I am never going to marry any one. I am too fond of my own way and my own will. No one would ever wish to marry me."

There was a touch of infinite pathos in Bridget's voice; her lips trembled as she spoke, and tears flowed fresh again.

"I am getting so weak and foolish," she said. "I despise myself, and yet I get worse every day. But do not let us talk any more of my feelings," she said, starting up. "Let us talk about Anthony and his plans. What am I to ask Cousin Gabriel to say to him? That the wife and child are to come and live in the Cottage, and make mother and me miserable?"

"Perhaps they will make you happy; perhaps you may see why they are sent to you, dear Bride; and a blessing may come, like an angel, unawares."

Bridget shook her head, and then, smoothing her hair, she replaced her hat, drew on her gloves and with repeated kisses bid Mrs. Rochemont good-bye.

"Dear Bride," was Madame's soliloquy. "How lovable she is! Would that she could find the great panacea which would soften all her rough places, and bring her into the ways of peace. We have been leading such quiet, uneventful, peaceful lives here in our little community; and now there seem to be clouds arising in various quarters. I must speak to my husband about

Blake and Claire. I almost fear to approach the subject, for I know it will grieve him. He does not like poor Blake, and is somewhat hard on him." As the thoughts were passing through her mind, Blake himself appeared.

"I am glad to find you alone, Cousin Grace," he said; "for I have something to say to you."

"Claire has prepared me a little for your communication, Blake," was the answer. "I think it would have been better to have consulted me *before* you won my child's affections. Long engagements are always undesirable, and——"

"I have not sought Claire's love without much prayer and thought; and I believe she sees with me, and will help me in the path I have chosen. As soon as I am ordained I am going out as a missionary, and Claire is ready to follow me, and labour with me amongst the heathen. She has no taste for all the folly and luxury she sees around her; and I hope you, Cousin Grace, will wish us God-speed."

There was something so wonderfully unquestioning in Blake's plans; and no fear, apparently, of any opposition. Claire was his, as if by sight, and he had no idea of any one's power to say him nay.

Mrs. Rochemont's reply was dignified:

"My husband must, of course, decide this matter, Blake. I have full confidence in the integrity of your zeal and earnestness; but whether my Claire's father will consent to an engagement is a question I must not now answer; and I myself

doubt much if she is at all fitted for the life you have marked out for yourself. She is by no means strong, though healthy; and if my girls, from leading a simple country life, are bright and vigorous, I cannot forget that there is great delicacy in the family; and you, Blake, are never really robust yourself."

"And for reasons like these you would hold back your child from the noble work of a missionary! From worldly motives you would keep from me one I love, and see her fall into carelessness and irreligion without compunction?"

Mrs. Rochemont had not time to reply, for the door opened and the Squire came in.

"Well, Blake," he exclaimed; "how are you? I am glad to see you here. Look what a basket of roses from Felton. We called there on the road, and have walked down to the Cottage with her."

Blake was standing a little behind Mrs. Rochemont's chair as the Squire spoke, and his face was pale with agitation. He threw his thick chestnut hair back from his forehead, and began: "I came here to tell you and Cousin Crace about —"

"About Anthony. Well, poor fellow, he must have a chance. He will be well out of the way at San Francisco; and it is the only thing to do, to take in the wife and child."

Blake stared at the Squire with a look of hopeless confusion, and Mrs. Rochemont hastened to explain: "Blake and Ambrose have not heard yet of Anthony's letter to you. Bridget thought it

better not to tell them till she had decided what was to be done."

"Ambrose knows," said the Squire. "I saw him at the Bank to-day, and told him. As long as he has none of the trouble, he won't care; and Blake, with all his religious views, will like to help a poor, forlorn woman."

Mrs. Rochemont saw that Blake was still utterly at a loss, and in a few words told him the story of his brother's marriage; and that his wife and child being homeless and destitute, they were to be taken in at the Cottage till Anthony could maintain them.

"I am thankful to God!" Blake said at last. "I have longed after Anthony with unspeakable longing, that I might by some means see him converted from the error of his ways. The tie of brotherhood is very strong; and what are we in God's sight, that we should judge others?"

"Yes, yes," said the Squire, "that's all very true; but when a man has forged his father's name, and escaped the law only by the intervention of the father he injured, why, though I am willing to give him a chance, I can't make a hero of him. It is getting on towards dinner-time; you had better stay, Blake."

"Blake has something to consult you about, dear Gabriel," his wife said, rising and laying her hand on her husband's arm, and pitying Blake's confusion, who stood in some awe of the Squire, and felt a great deal of his self-assurance sink in his presence.

"Will you listen to him before the girls come in, for it is about our Claire?"

The Squire turned full round on Blake, and faced him, saying—

"Our Claire!"

"Yes," said Blake, in a much more humble tone than he had used to Madame; "there is a strong attachment between me and your daughter, and I ask you to sanction an engagement."

The Squire's eyes blazed upon Blake. "Am I to understand, sir, that you have won my child's love without our knowledge or consent?"

"I have won it," said Blake, more firmly: "I thank God for it; and I have won, too, her promise to be my helpmeet in the mission field of Africa—subject," he added, "to your consent, of course."

"Then I am bound to tell you I withhold that consent. So this is what you have meant by your long letters, and hanging about here. I thought better of you, Blake. We have had enough, and more than enough, of cousin marriages amongst the Rochemonts—we want no more. I utterly and entirely forbid my daughter to engage herself to you. She is a good child, and will mind what I and her mother say. Out to Africa, indeed! A fair, fragile girl like that. And you, without an ounce of strength or a pound's worth of flesh on your bones. Stay at home at work here, and put such idle fancies out of your head."

All that was noble in Blake's nature rose on the defensive.

"You, sir, may call preaching the gospel to the heathen an idle fancy, but the command is laid on me by God, and I will not refuse to obey His voice; nor do I think you can separate me from Claire. I will wait."

"Why did you not come to me, Blake," said Mrs. Rochemont reproachfully, "and consult me before you told Claire what you felt?"

Blake made no reply. Presently he said—

"May I see her?"

"Not to-night," said the Squire: "not till her mother has talked to her. I must wish you good-afternoon now, for I have letters to write before dinner."

Blake turned away; his face was very pale, but his love was real, and self was more out of sight than usual with him.

"I hope what blame there is may fall—on me," he said, "and not—not on her." And then he was gone.

"I am very sorry for him," said Madame, with a sigh, "very sorry; but with his delicacy, and indeed on every account, the engagement would be most undesirable. I wonder how the dear child will take it? She has been perfectly open with me, Gabriel, for she told me this morning Blake had said he loved her."

"He had no right to say so then," said the Squire indignantly; "tampering with her too, in other matters, and filling the child's head with nonsense. She will be fancying herself better than her mother next."

Mrs. Rochemont saw it was not the time to say more then; and calling little Christine to her, she put on her bonnet and shawl, and went across the park to visit a poor woman who was sick, and who lived in a cottage outside the gates.

Little Christine stepped merrily along by her mother's side, and accounted herself very fortunate to have her mother all to herself. She chattered about many things, and beguiled Madame Rochemont from anxious thoughts. As they were returning from the visit, Claire was seen coming down a bye-path, and Blake disappeared in the opposite direction. Claire's face showed her mother that Blake had communicated to her the Squire's decision.

Mrs. Rochemont took Claire's hand in hers, with a silent pressure; and then, when Christine had run off to feed her white pigeons, Claire said:

"What shall I do, mother? I can never give up Blake—never!"

"My dear one, there is no question what you must do; wait patiently, and see how God's hand leads you."

"But it is leading me, mother; of that I am sure. Blake has done me so much good. We have prayed together and read together, and he has shown me how a stiff, formal sort of religion like Mr. Miles'——"

"Hush, Claire; don't let me hear you judge others; before honour is humility. God would have us all be lowly in our own eyes, and look on the things of others as well as on our own."

"Blake is a saint," Claire said promptly. "And oh! I am not worthy of his love; but I have it, and I must never, never give it up."

Mrs. Rochemont was not as yet skilled in matters of this kind, and moreover, it was the first time that one of her children had set herself up in opposition to her. Janet and her mother were always one, and the twins followed Janet's lead. Claire had always shown what may be called the most spirit, but she had ever been submissive and willing to do what her mother wished.

"It would be wrong to give Blake up," Claire said; "and I have promised to hold firmly to him."

"You were with him just now," Mrs. Rochemont said. "That was hardly right, for your father told him he was not to see you alone till I had spoken to you. He must have watched for you near the house."

Claire made no answer. And then her mother went on very quietly and tenderly, but very firmly, to tell her all her father's objections to an engagement of uncertain length, and that he did not think Blake had acted a loyal part in winning her love without consulting her parents.

Claire listened with heightened colour and tearful eyes, but she did not say more than:

"I cannot, cannot give up Blake, mother. Do not ask me."

That evening at the Hall passed wearily. The Squire was fidgety and restless, and paced up and down the sitting-room; complained of his coffee,

and sharply—far more sharply than his wont—reproved the twins for upsetting a basket of wools; and sent Christine to bed the moment the clock struck eight.

Janet felt for her sister, but her judgment was with her father. A frail, dreamy, delicate creature like Blake was surely most unfit to take care of Claire; and he would in all probability very soon fall beneath the effects of a bad climate. If Blake must go out to Africa, he ought to go alone; it was selfish to wish to take Claire, at any rate until he had proved his own powers of endurance.

So reasoned the direct matter-of-fact Janet: and yet she was full of sympathy for her sister, when at last the interview with her father, to which she was summoned after prayers, was over, and she came up to their room, and flung herself, in a passion of weeping, on her bed.

"If Blake were rich and great," she sobbed, "if it was a grand appointment in India, they would say 'Yes' at once; but just because he is a saint, and will give up his life for God's service, they will not hear of his love for me. I shall never, never love any one else; and if I have to give him up, my heart will break."

Janet had had small experience in this kind of trouble; she had not even read many novels, none with exciting scenes of the sort on which the imagination of most girls feed in these days. She could only comfort by kisses and tender words, and Claire at last sobbed herself to sleep in her sister's arms; and with the marvellous

power of youth to assert itself over pain of mind, as well as of body, slept soundly till the morning.

The subject was of course spoken of at the Cottage the same evening. And when Bridget went into her mother's room, as she always did before parting for the night, Mrs. Rochemont surprised her by the easy way in which she took both Blake's plans and projects, and the coming of Anthony's wife and child.

"I do not wonder at all at Claire caring for Blake," Mrs. Rochemont said; "and with five girls it won't do for the Squire to be too particular. Then Blake is so handsome, so gentle and lovable."

"But so delicate, mother, you seem to forget that; you know his lungs are by no means sound, and he has no vigour or power about him"—and Bridget hesitated; "and I cannot wonder that Cousin Gabriel was annoyed at Blake extracting a promise from Claire without his leave."

"Well, perhaps that was a mistake," said the mother, with a prolonged yawn. "Good-night, Bride darling; you look tired. I am sure you take too long walks."

"I heard from Bernard Wentworth this evening, mother," said Bridget. "He is coming here next week; he is full of plans and schemes." "Of which I dare say you are the chief confidante, Bridget. I am sure no one takes such trouble for others as you do. It would wear me out; but then I was never strong. You will remember

to arrange about that little room for poor Anthony's child to-morrow. And Bridget, do speak to the grocer at Rollestone; he ought not to have sent us such a cheese as that we had to-day. Threaten him that I shall deal altogether in Wychester—it would be much cheaper. And Bridget," with another yawn, "Maude expects you to go there early to-morrow about those diagrams; don't forget I told you. Good-night, dearest child; just give me the eau de Cologne before you go."

At last Bridget was free, and sat down at her little table in her own room with a sense of relief. She buried her face in her hands for some minutes, and then, drawing her small lamp nearer, opened her desk and took out a letter—Bernard's letter—the second she had received from him since the wedding at Clifton.

To the common observer there was nothing in that letter to mark it as different from those which had preceded it; and yet to Bridget there was that which is so forcibly expressed by the poet in these terse lines :

"Oh, the little more, and how much it is ;
And the little less, and what worlds away !"

Bernard was worlds away from her now ; and not till he had absolutely left her did she know how she had lived in him, his interests, his hopes and fears, for years. Many a time had she sat up at night at that very desk, by the light of the same little lamp, for a good talk on paper

with him. Many a time had the sight of his writing on an envelope given her a thrill of pleasure; and now it was with a sense of pain, deeper than she cared to confess, that she took the sheet from the envelope and read for the second time:

"DEAR BRIDGET,—If Aunt Anna will have me, I should like to come and see you next week. I have made all my arrangements in Somersetshire, and I am getting my house ready there. The mills are near Ilminster, and very thriving. Silk-making has its interesting side, as well as book-making. I suppose no one in your parts knows of my engagement. I am going out for her early in September. I will bring her photograph for you to see; they get up those things so much better abroad than here, at half the cost. Of course, when I come, I shall tell every one about Ida, if you have not already done so. How goes Snowdrop? and has the new rector introduced you to any old fossils over and above himself?

"Your affectionate cousin,

"BERNARD WENTWORTH."

Bridget's face as she read this letter was a study. There was a little curl of the lip, and yet a dimness in her bright eyes which seemed to say her feelings were more hurt than her pride.

After a few minutes she took her pen and wrote:

"DEAR BERNARD,—Mother will be very glad

to see you next week. Your old room is ready for you. *Of course* no one here knows of your engagement, for did you not beg me to keep it secret? I hope your plans will all succeed. Next time you come you must bring Ida with you. I shall like to see her Florentine photograph. The foreign ones are, as you say, much clearer and better than ours. We are all well, thanks, including Snowdrop, though she had a narrow escape the other day of broken knees, when Blake was riding her. If you come on Wednesday, Ambrose can drive you from Wychester.

“Your affectionate cousin,

“BRIDGET DE LILLE ROCHEMONT.”

“How hard it is to write to him like this,” Bridget thought; “and it will be harder still to meet him next week. I hope I shan’t be very disagreeable,” said Bridget, as, having finished her writing, she let down the masses of her brown hair and prepared for bed. “What is it that hymn says we had on Sunday :

‘Change and decay in all around I see ;

O Thou who changest not, abide with me.’

And Mr. Miles’ sermon on the words, ‘With Him is no variableness, neither shadow of turning,’ how beautiful it was ! I wish He would come to me.”

Dear Bridget ! He was with her, though she knew it not. He would open her eyes that she

might see. Greater are those who are for her than those which are against her. The day is coming when her soul shall be refreshed at the Fountain of changeless purity and love.

CHAPTER IV.

RIA AND NINA.

'God, duty, love, submission, fellowship,
Must first be framed in man, as music is,
Before they live outside him, as a law.
And still they grow, and shape themselves around
With fuller concentration in their life
Of inward and of outward energies,
Blending to make the last result—called Man.'

GEORGE ELLIOT.

EAST REPTON VICARAGE was a low, irregular, redbrick house, with a walled garden behind filled with fruit trees, a paddock at the side, and in front a drive sweeping round a plot of grass, shut off by white-painted posts and chains, and having in the centre a large walnut tree.

The whole place had an air of desertion about it; and even now Mr. Miles was there, bringing with him signs of awakening life, the stillness and quiet of all around seemed unbroken.

As Bridget let the wooden gate swing back on a bright summer afternoon, she said to her sister-in-law—

"What a place this is ; it might be Mariana's Moated Grange. I wonder Mr. Miles came to it !"

"Yes ; it must be such a change for him after Cambridge," Maude said. "Look, Bridget ! there he is digging at that bed by the side of the house—how amusing !"

As the two girls went up to the porch, a Scotch terrier, well on in years, arose from his position in a sunny corner, and gave a sharp bark. The sound made Mr. Miles stop in the act of a vigorous thrust of the spade, and turn round.

"Good-afternoon," he said ; "I am sorry you have caught me with such questionable hands that I can hardly offer you one in welcome."

"I hope we are not interrupting you, Mr. Miles," Maude said, in her pretty, gentle way ; "but we came to show you the diagrams. I have made an attempt," she continued, unrolling a large sheet of drawing paper.

"That is very kind of you," he said. "Come in and rest in the library while I make myself presentable." He led the way along a matted passage, to a room at the back of the house, with a large circular window looking into the garden, and with a peep beyond of a clump of pollard willows and a little placid piece of water. The room itself was filled with dark oak cabinets, where many treasures were stored—treasures of earth and sea—all arranged with a loving, careful hand. There was a long book-case across the whole end of the room, and over the high wooden chimney-

piece, with its quaint devices, was a long strip of plate-glass, round which pots of ferns, ivy, and various climbing plants of easy-growing, hardy natures were gathered. One picture hung over the large writing-table—a beautiful engraving from one of the old masters; and in the window there was a stand of flowers and shells and fossils piled up in a strange but picturesque confusion.

“How like the room is to the man!” was Bridget’s remark when they were left together. “So out of the common way of rooms.”

“Yes,” said Maude doubtfully; for her eye was educated to admire trim and pretty upholstery and ormolu chairs, tables, and the like—“Yes: but it is rather sombre—so like a man’s attempt to be ornamental.”

Bridget smiled and began a more systematic examination of all about her, going the round of the cabinets till she ended in the writing-table again. Printed sheets were here, well known to the eye of the initiated, scrawled over with pen and ink-cabalistic signs, lined and interlined.

“What are these,” Maude asked, “lying all over the table?”

“Proof sheets,” said Bridget, who was looking intently at one, as she read the words:

“Before us, every hour of every day, God lays an open book, written with His finger, inspired by His Spirit. Every tree and flower and rock and stone are His message to us; and dwellers in crowded cities, who see not flowers and hills and waving corn, have the noblest page of

all stretched over them; the sky, with its varied cloud-land and its changing light by day and by night; its grand array of shining worlds, where the love of God is great in majesty, as in the little star-shaped celandine it is great in modest loveliness."

Bridget was still looking at the sheet when Mr. Miles returned. She turned from the table, and said:

"I have been reading a few lines of a printed paper lying on that table."

"Oh! one of my proofs; they are pouring in just now in an unbroken stream. I was getting rather hazy over them when I went to dig up that bed at the side house; for I must get some flowers to grow there. There is nothing to smile a welcome to my guests now, not even when they come so kindly laden with sketches as you have done, Mrs. Rochemont. Now, then, may I look. Thanks; if I may suggest, that frond is too long, and the petals of the actiniæ too thick; it ought to be thus," he said taking a pencil and marking the drawing.

"They must be five, or six times larger, I know," said Maude. "I am going to lay out the paper on the floor, and do them on my knees."

"You do work with a will!" said Mr. Miles, delightedly. "We shall have a grand exhibition on Tuesday."

"Ambrose told me to say," said Maude, "that he hoped you would be able to come and dine with us on Monday, and then I shall have the

diagrams ready for your inspection, and Bridget and I will take them to the schoolroom on Tuesday. Janet and Claire wish to help us, if they may."

"There are likely to be some people coming in from Rollestone, I hear," said Bridget; "and we shall be quite celebrated in East Repton, at last."

Mr. Miles laughed—his own pleasant, musical laugh. Then, seeing that Bridget's eye was still glancing at the sheets on the table, he took up a roll and handed them to her.

"Would you like to read these?" he asked. "I shall not want them till to-morrow."

"May I really?" Bridget said. "Thank you so much."

The door now opened, and a tray and large silver urn made their appearance, carried by a boy in neat livery, whom Bridget recognised as a brother of Tom's.

Mrs. Bond, Mr. Miles' housekeeper, followed—a somewhat stately personage, who had superintended her master's concerns at Cambridge, and had followed him in his retirement to the country living. Mrs. Bond curtsied to the two ladies, filled the teapot, and inquired if they took cream and sugar.

Having dispensed the tea, which was fragrant and good, and cut a light sponge-cake, Mrs. Bond made another curtsy and retired.

"My housekeeper is somewhat troubled with her domestic economies," said Mr. Miles. "This boy is the third we have tried out of the village."

He promises well, and his mother says that Miss Rochemont, of the Cottage, is '*that* fond of her eldest boy, Tom, she could not part with him nohow.'

"A maternal delusion," said Bridget, laughing. "Tom is the very quintessence of idleness and slowness; I hope his brother may do better here. All the Williams family are lazy, and yet they are so good-natured and respectable, that every one is drawn to them by a sort of irresistible fascination."

"Well, it is not a bad plan to try to keep the balance even with people: put all the virtues on one side, and failings on the other—and the former are generally the heavier weight."

And now the door opened once more, this time to admit Mr. Rochemont, who was announced with some pomp and circumstance by Mrs. Bond. Maude sprang to meet her husband, exclaiming—

"I did not think you were coming to-day."

"I got off from the Bank early, and have ridden over in less than two hours. Daisy was in such good form. I heard at home that you were carrying pictures to the Vicarage, so I thought I would come and pay my respects to Mr. Miles, and pick you up."

"What a comfortable chair!" Ambrose said, sinking down into one in the window, while his wife hovered about him with tea and cake.

Such a pretty picture she made of young wifehood, beaming with contentment and quiet delight

and so infinitely fond of her husband. Ambrose had all the best points of his race in his face and figure, and was a very good-looking man. He disliked worry and fidgets; and though he would do a moderate amount at the Bank uncomplainingly poor old Cousin Anthony often recalled regretfully the days when the father, in busy times, took a double share of work, while the son was only too ready to shift off any excess of the burden, and yet did it so good-temperedly that there was no complaint to make. Ambrose was one of those people who pass through life very comfortably. They are not obtrusively selfish, but they manage to keep their own interests well to the front; and their love of ease and prosperity gives them the character for good temper, while very often they think a quarrel too much trouble, and prefer acquiescence to opposition on the same principle.

The Vicar walked down the road with his friends, and Ambrose and his sisters were a little behind Mr. Miles and Maude.

"This is a nuisance about Anthony's wife and child, Bridget; but I dare say you will make room for them. He is ashamed to face us all, I suppose; and well he may be."

"Blake is gone to London this morning to see Anthony, and he will bring back his wife and little girl with him."

"What a good fellow old Blake is!" said Ambrose. "He is gone to supply Anthony with tracts, I dare say."

"He is longing to speak seriously to him," said Bridget sharply. "No one can question the sincerity of his intentions."

"Wentworth is coming here next week also," said Ambrose. "I had a letter from him this morning. He says he is going to be married. I never was so surprised in my life."

"I wonder at that," said Bridget calmly, "as you have so lately taken to yourself a wife. Why should you be surprised when other people do the same?"

"Well," said Ambrose, "I had got it into my head that you and Bernard were thinking of uniting your fortunes; you were such tremendously fast friends."

"We are friends now," said Bridget, schooling herself to betray no particular emotion— "and cousins; what more did you expect?"

"Bernard is running a risk, I think, in putting his money into those silk mills: he had better have consulted some of us first. The consequence is, he is rather short of ready money, and that was his object in writing to me. Of course you knew of his engagement, Bridget?"

"Yes; I knew it first on the day of your marriage. He told me then, but did not wish me to publish it. What friends Mr. Miles and Maude seem!"

At the gate of the High Bank House Mr. Miles and Maude stopped, and Ambrose went into the garden with his wife, Bridget and Mr. Miles

walked on together to the turn leading to the Cottage.

"I have not seen your brother Blake this week," Mr. Miles said; "what has become of him?"

"He is gone to London to-day on a mission of charity. You may have heard," she said, her colour rising, "that we have a brother who has been a great sorrow to us."

"No, I had not heard it," said Mr. Miles. "Beyond the fact that there was a third brother, I did not know anything."

"He has been a trouble always," Bridget said. "About four years ago he did something very dishonourable—forged my father's name, and broke his heart. He left the country then, and we have heard nothing of him since my dear father's death till a few days ago, when he wrote to Cousin Gabriel to intercede for him, that my mother would receive his wife and child. We are going to take them in while he goes out to San Francisco. It is not a pleasant prospect, having one's ordinary life broken in on, and a stranger introduced into one's home. It is just the thing, above all others, which I dislike—hate, I may say."

"It must be plainly your duty," said Mr. Miles coolly.

"You think so? Well, I am not so sure about it. The only thing to be done, in my case, is to make a virtue of necessity. Troubles never come singly: Blake has been adding to them by making love to Claire—Cousin Gabriel's second

girl. Of course they do not approve it. Blake is so delicate and so visionary, and the idea of his taking a wife to the South Sea Islands or the West Coast of Africa is absurd. It is not likely that Cousin Gabriel should entertain such a notion; and Blake has been very wrong to act as he has done—making Claire miserable and all of us uncomfortable. The world is a dreadful tangle at best!" said Bridget with a sigh.

"Not really a tangle," said Mr. Miles. "It is only that we cannot always take the clue which God would have us take."

"There is no clue in my case, at least," said Bridget. "Everything has gone crooked, with no intention or design of mine."

"But with the design of One greater and wiser than you are."

"Then you think God designs evil and sin, and misery that comes from sin?"

"I think that His boundless love in Christ Jesus our Lord is over all," said Mr. Miles solemnly. "If our life is hid with Him, whatever the apparent discrepancies or—as you express it—tangles, we shall emerge at last into the full light of GOD. But we must surrender ourselves—give ourselves up to Him. Then we see and feel His love in everything. On the great highway, with our faces set Zionward. The desert rejoices and blossoms as the rose, and waters spring forth; it is the desert still, but to us it is a land of brooks and rivers, of songs and gladness."

"Have you found it so?" Bridget asked, almost unconsciously.

"Yes; I have," was the prompt, decided answer.

They said no more, but parted soon after. Bridget's heart was full, and she was pressing on towards the light. Present, real, practical, abiding—this was the faith she needed, this for which her soul grasped as a thirsty land. Blessed are they who do thus hunger and thirst, for they shall be filled!

The lecture in the schoolroom was a marked success. Mr. Miles had such a pleasant, easy way of putting things before his audience; and when he said at the close of the evening that he hoped to see the people there very often during the winter months, there was a great stamping of feet and other expressions of satisfaction.

Things seen are mightier than things heard; and the coloured pictures, the work of young Mrs. Rochemont, were accounted most wonderful. To the simple folk who gazed at them the precise position of the sun and moon seemed an assured fact; and the cause of the lunar eclipse, which they had been watching a few weeks before at their new Vicar's instigation—shown so clearly by the position of the earth between the sun and moon. Then stories were told of the days of old, when men looked upon an eclipse with terror, as a judgment, or as a sign of danger before battles, and of coming troubles. From this the Vicar brought out the fact that the more we watch and look into the ways of God, the more we shall see

how perfect is His order, and see too, not the dark shadow of wrath, but the exceeding beauty of love in all the arrangements of His providence and grace.

The seaweeds and actiniæ, the little scavenger crab, and the beginnings of acquaintance with the world below the surface of the great sea—so near to them—were left for another time, as the astronomy had led Mr. Miles on farther than he had expected, and was held out as a good thing to come. A Cambridge friend of the Vicar's was present—he had come to spend a few days with his old college ally. He was a very thin little man, with tightly-compressed lips and small twinkling eyes. The whole party adjourned to the Vicarage to supper after the lecture, and Bridget fell to the care of Mr. Freeman.

"Miles has a comfortable berth here, on the whole," Mr. Freeman remarked; "and plenty of time for his writing and reading. But I never expected to see him turning out at five a.m. to go and look after sick parishioners; still less did I expect to hear him telling a set of village folk that the moon was not cream cheese, or that the old moons were not cut up into stars every month, or got rid of by some process of absorption. A waste of words and time, rather, it strikes me, for a man like Miles. Betsy Jones and Tom Smith would do quite as well without hearing about eclipses and such-like."

"We have no proof that they would," said Bridget. "The Tom Smiths and Betsy Joneses of

the next generation in East Repton may be a great deal better than those of this."

"Not from getting smatterings of knowledge," said Mr. Freeman; "stray chips from a workshop like Miles'."

"Anything that interests people, and takes them out of little, grovelling, petty follies, is good. It will be a great deal better for Tom Smith to sit in the schoolroom once a fortnight through the winter, hearing of things he never heard of before, than sitting behind the red curtain at the Beehive talking scandal."

"Upon my word, Miss Rochemont, Miles has a warm adherent in you. Did you draw those clever diagrams for him?"

"No; they were done by my sister-in-law, Mrs. Ambrose Rochemont. I could never draw a line properly."

"You are a musician then, I suppose."

"No! I do nothing," said Bridget. "I mean nothing in the least ornamental. I can ride—and I am at home on horseback. I have—or rather my mother has—two delightful horses, Snowdrop and Daisy. They want exercise; so if you are disposed to mount, one of them is at your service."

"Thanks. I should like a ride over this flat country very much, if Miles will conduct me safely; but he is not a very trusty guide. Then he is apt to hop off a horse at a moment's notice, to pick up some fungi or rubbish."

Bridget laughed, and the conversation went pleasantly on to the close of the meal. Then fol-

lowed a walk home under the stars. The two elder girls had to be deposited at the Hall, Ambrose and his wife at the High Bank House, and Bridget conducted down to the Cottage by Mr. Miles and his friend. There is a delicious sense of sweetness and rest in the country at night, when the stars shimmer through the branches of the trees, as the leaves quiver a little in the scarcely perceptible breeze which whispers gently as it wanders over the sleeping earth. Then there is the fragrance of hidden flowers, and the scent of dewy turf and grasses—the service of the night going up to God while the world is asleep, like the prayers of souls who hold sweet communion with their Lord, while others slumber, as they wake, in forgetfulness of Him.

The two friends turned from the door of the Cottage, when it closed on Bridget, without speaking. Both enjoyed the silence, and the thoughts of both were busy.

“What do you think of Miss Rochemont, Miles?” was Mr. Freeman’s sudden question, when at last they had left the shade of the wood and were out upon the road again.

“Think of her! I ought rather to ask you that question.”

“She interests you, Miles. I saw you watching me at supper; you know that is true.”

“Yes; I heard every word you said. Miss Rochemont was a match for you.”

“There is something remarkable about her; and what an expressive face hers is. When she

is talking it is all fire and movement. She is such a contrast to those two fair damsels from the Hall, with their grace, and composure, and prettiness. But seriously, Miles, you are happy to have fallen amongst this clan of Rochemonts. Who would have believed that sickly, sentimental fellow Rochemont, of Trinity, who has just taken his degree, would have a sister like that, and a brother like that fine man who has the pretty little wife?"

"Relations are not always alike, and there are varieties in tribes; and with that aphorism I will turn to another subject," was the rejoinder. "I wanted to consult you, Freeman, about a line in *Æschylus*; I am at work on him, you know."

So the two friends spoke of Bridget and her people, while she went into the Cottage drawing-room, where a pretty lamp shed a soft light, and a figure standing by the table turned to meet her.

"Bernard!"

"Yes. I am come a few days earlier. Aunt Anna says it does not matter. I hope it won't inconvenience you."

"Not in the least," said Bridget, "is is just as well you should be here a day or two before the incursion of the Vandals. Where is mother?"

"Gone to bed; she was tired."

"Have you had any food?" Bridget asked. "I hope Katherine has taken care of you."

"Yes, indeed, I have only just returned from a sumptuous feast in the dining-room. Where have you been?"

"To the schoolroom, to a lecture given by our new Vicar; and we went back to supper to the Vicarage."

"He is full of schemes, I suppose?" said Bernard, taking a pocket-book out and producing a photograph. "Here she is," he said, handing it to Bridget.

"How beautiful!" was Bridget's involuntary exclamation; "but——" The "but" was half unconscious, and Bernard caught it up.

"'But' what? You had better finish; you mean she does not look clever, I suppose?"

"No; it is a lovely picture," Bridget repeated; "and so young. How old is she?"

"Twenty-two, but she looks like eighteen. Her position is a sad one, for she attracts attention—how can she help it?—and Lady Montserat gets angry that her plain daughters are put into the shade. She is kind to her substantially, however, and she is to be married from the Palazzo Corinna."

"What a grand name!" Bridget said; "how magnificent it will look in the *Times*! And is your house getting on?"

"Yes; but I wish I had your taste to help me, and your economy too. My money has been running short, and I have been obliged to ask Ambrose to give me help."

"That is a pity," said Bridget decidedly. "To start with anything like a debt is such a clog and drag."

"Well, it is not exactly a debt; half the world gets accommodation from their bankers, you know."

"I daresay! but I would rather not have accommodation from mine," said Bridget. "I hope the business itself will be productive."

"Oh, there will be a very high rate of interest after the first two years. Meanwhile, we must live quietly, down there in Somersetshire. I dare say it will be dull—I mean out of the way of things. Now," with a hardly perceptible sigh, "tell me how you are getting on."

"Family chronicles are dull, and we have so much of it here with the Rochemonts," Bridget said; "but I will briefly sketch the state of affairs for you." This she proceeded to do in her own way, and Bernard became deeply interested.

"After all, how few women can talk like Bride," he said to himself.

They left family details after a time, and fell to discussing Elizabeth Barrett Browning's last volume of poems, when the destiny of Italy was the theme of her swan song. In this volume there is one of the poetess's most beautiful works, "De Profundis," and Bridget read it aloud in her clear ringing voice—a voice which had been familiar to Bernard for many years. And yet to-night he was conscious of a change in his cousin. Some deeper spring had been touched. Bride was more really in earnest than he had ever known her.

"Leave the book with me, Bride," he said, as at last she took up her hat and jacket, and pre-

pared to say good-night. "How well you read that! It is not like Mrs. Browning's usual style quite—more religious, I mean."

"Is it?" Bridget said. "It is more beautiful, I think. Good-night."

"Good-night," he said; and in another minute he was left to his own meditations: the volume of poetry in one hand, Ida's photograph in the other.

"What was the 'but,' I wonder? Bridget is getting very grave; not half as sharp and saucy as she used to be. How well she read that verse. I must look for it—towards the end, I think. Ah, here it is:

"I praise Thee while my days go on,
I love Thee while my days go on;
Through dark and dearth, through fire and frost,
With emptied arms and treasure lost,
I thank Thee while my days go on.

"And having in Thy life-depth thrown
Being and suffering (which are one)——"

Bernard shut the book and fell into musing again on his past and future. Something was wanting in his anticipations; what was it? He had gained in Ida beauty and devotion and apparent gratitude. What could he desire better, unless it were the addition of the hard coin which tends so greatly to smooth the path of life? But to marry a woman who had anything to confer on him, he could never have thought of. Bernard must be a

king, to dispense his gifts; not a subject, to receive them. It was all right, therefore, and he must rest content as he was.

Bridget, on her side, thought out her half-expressed doubts. "She may be beautiful, but it is not a trustworthy face. It is weak, too, and Bernard will never be satisfied with any one he cannot trust.—As if I knew anything about it, after all!" was the conclusion of the whole matter. "People must marry whom they please."

The next two days were pleasant ones. Bernard was like his old self—seemed to throw cares to the winds, and walked and drove and rode in all directions with the Rochemonts of every age and degree; and made friends with Mr. Miles over some flint instruments, which excited his interest, and had been dug out of the wonderful Kent's Cavern at Torquay. The possible effect of the action of ice or water on one, and the evident mark of intentional formation by the hand of man in another, brought on a sharp discussion, to which it delighted Bridget to sit by and listen. It was the afternoon of the third day when this discussion took place, and Mr. Miles was dispensing his excellent tea from the silver urn, when a messenger arrived from the Cottage—no other than the redoubtable Tom—to say that Miss Rochemont was to go home directly. "And if you please, sir," said Tom's brother, "Miss Rochemont is to be quick about it."

Mrs. Bond, who was just filling the massive silver teapot, turned upon Ben such a look that

he retreated to exchange confidences with his brother at the door, and so electrified the good housekeeper that she neglected to turn the handle of the urn for the first time in her life, and the tea-tray was flooded.

"Such manners!" she exclaimed, as she tried to retrieve her blunder, and made way for Bridget, who followed Tom swiftly into the hall.

"Who is it, Tom? Speak directly."

"It is only Mr. Blake and a lady and little girl have come; but——"

"So like Blake!" murmured Bridget. "Why did he not tell us the time? Why did he not come by the coach?"

The white gate of the Vicarage swung behind her, and was caught by Bernard.

"What is wrong, Bride?"

"Nothing; that is, only a wrong that no one will ever set right. Anthony's wife and child have arrived at the Cottage."

"I thought Blake said they would not arrive till to-morrow."

"Of course he did; but when did Blake ever keep to his day or time? We all know him and his unpunctual, desultory ways."

"I am dreadfully sorry for you," said Bernard, with sudden earnestness; "it is a bore to be invaded in this way."

Bridget felt in no mood for sympathy. There are times when a kind word is like the fabulous straw on the camel's back, or the drop in the full cup.

"Go back and finish your talk with Mr. Miles, Bernard. You will miss all the fossils."

"I don't like to let you go home alone," said Bernard. "You have too much thrown on you, as it is, though you are so brave and strong."

"Please don't!" she said, stopping suddenly and turning towards him. "Go back to the Vicarage, and let me meet them alone with mother. I would rather, I think."

"Very well," Bernard replied, seeing she was in earnest. "I am going to dine at the Hall, so you will have the evening in peace to settle in."

Bridget heard the sound of his steady footsteps as she stood for a moment where he had left her.

"Brave and strong!" she exclaimed. "I am cowardly and weak. Do they think I want nothing to lean on and trust to? I hunger for it. Why will they all speak as if I were made of stone? I would give anything to have poor Blake's unquestioning faith in God—and Claire's in him."

When Bridget reached the Cottage there was nothing but the mark of wheels on the drive to show that there had been an arrival. The carriage that had brought the travellers from Wychester was gone, and there seemed no bustle and confusion.

Bridget paused a moment in the little hall, and said to herself, "I must be kind to them. I must try to be kind; it is not their fault." Then she opened the door of the dining-room, from which she heard the sound of Blake's voice; and

at the table, where a substantial tea had been hastily set out, sat her mother, Blake, and the strange sister-in-law, with a child upon her knee.

"Is this Bridget?" said the new-comer, rising to meet her with an air of the most perfect simplicity. "I am sure you can't be glad to see us; so don't say so. Here, *Antonia mia*, this is Aunt Bridget; speak to her, *carissima*." Little Antonia laid her curly head on her mother's shoulder and refused to respond to her aunt's offered kiss.

Blake now greeted his sister, and entered into a long story of his reasons for coming a day sooner. They amounted to nothing, but Bridget saw he looked pale and tired and worn, and felt sorry for him.

"Take some more coffee, Maria," said Mrs. Rochemont.

"Please don't call me Maria," was the answer. "The terribly hard English *Maria* is too much for me. Anthony calls me Ria, and I like that."

"Ria is a very unusual name," Mrs. Rochemont said; "but just as you please. Will you have more coffee, and has the little one finished her tea?"

"She is too shy to eat," said Ria, pressing her close. "Look up, my Nina, look up. Thy mother is here; why shouldst thou be afraid? This is thy father's home. Mother is not afraid, see; and see there is kind Uncle Blake."

Nina raised her head a little and peeped from under her long eye-lashes at Blake, but refused to eat any cake.

"I will take her up to bed, if I may," the mother said. "Our box is gone upstairs, I think. We have only brought one, and a basket and my violin."

"Your violin!" exclaimed Mrs. Rochemont.

"Yes," Blake interposed; "Ria is a great musician. She sings beautifully, and if she were strong she would be able to teach singing," he went on, as Bridget left the room with the two strangers, little Nina still clinging desperately to her mother, who seemed to totter under the weight of her three-year old daughter.

"Well, Blake, my dear boy, did you see Anthony?"

"Yes; and I think it is hopeful, mother. He showed a great deal of feeling about our father's death—said he would give anything to be sure of his forgiveness. I think this wife of his has a good influence over him."

"She is a very strange little person, so un-English and foreign."

"That is from her Italian descent. Her mother was an Italian, born at Florence, and married, it seems, when a mere child, to an Englishman, who made a living as a musician."

"Where did poor Anthony fall in with them?"

"He lodged in their house in Jersey, where he was hiding after his disgrace; and by way of improving matters, he married this girl. She has been out to Australia with him, where the child was born; and lately they have been living in London. Ria had a dreadful illness, and as her

father and mother are both dead, she must have been left friendless and alone if he had not appealed to us. Ria is quite unfit to rough it; she is subject to severe bleeding from the lungs; and the sea-sickness on her voyage home from Australia seems to have been dreadful."

"Well, it is a strange story. I rather dread the comments of our neighbours. Not that we see much of any one now. My health makes me unfit for society, and people soon die out of notice. My poor Anthony! You have acted a very kind and brotherly part, dear Blake; and I hope you are happier as to your own prospects."

"I shall be ordained at Easter, and intend to go out to a mission station next year, taking Claire with me," was Blake's decided answer.

"But the Squire will not hear of it," exclaimed Mrs. Rochemont; "and even Madame is against it."

"They will come round," Blake said; "and I have committed my way to God in the fullest confidence. Oh, mother!" Blake exclaimed, "I may be cast down and troubled, but I am not destroyed, and when I saw my poor brother, I could only say, who made me to differ? I pray night and day for him and for you all, that you may be brought into the way of peace."

Mrs. Rochemont suppressed a yawn as Blake continued for some time in the same strain. Then she kissed him affectionately, stroked back his thick curls from his brow as she leaned over his

chair, and, ringing the bell, summoned Katherine to have the tea cleared away, expressing a hope that the chicken which was ordered for their late meal would not be over-done; and that Miss Bridget had seen the carpet in the spare room was well protected by drugget.

So easily do the Mrs. Rochemonts of the world get through life.

CHAPTER V.

LOST AND FOUND.

"I seem to be tired a little, that's all, and long for rest."

THE GRANDMOTHER.

BRIDGET followed Ria and her burden upstairs, and remonstrated in vain against the unnecessary exertion, as she saw the mother, pale and breathless, deposit little Nina at last upon the bed.

"I am sure you ought not to carry that heavy child," Bridget said, as her new sister-in-law sank exhausted into a chair by the bed, and laid her head on the pillow near little Nina.

"She is not a heavy child; she is my *piccola*. I always carry her. I do as I think best; do I not, mine own?"

Nina replied by stretching out a dimpled hand and stroking her young mother's face, holding up her rosy lips for a kiss.

"She is tired, my dove," said Ria, in a low monotone; "she is tired. Mother would sing if she could, but her voice is gone. It will come back when father comes, my Nina; joy and hope will come back with him too."

All these endearments were a novelty to Bridget, and she turned away to rearrange the room. Presently she inquired of Ria if she should help her to unpack her trunk. Little Nina was falling off to sleep from sheer inability to keep awake, and her mother gently disengaged herself and sank back into the chair by the bedside.

"Shall I not help you to unpack?" Bridget asked, for the second time.

"No; oh no. I can do everything. I have never had help; I want none."

"But little Nina must be undressed and put properly to bed," Bridget said; "you must get out a few things for her."

"I shall not disturb her, thank you. She will do very well—we shall do very well. It is a nice room, a pretty room; and is not that the sea lying down there, far off?"

"Yes," Bridget said; "the sea is down at the bottom of that glen, and we hear the waves breaking on the beach at high tide."

"Oh, I am glad of that!" Ria said. "I love the sound of the sea, and I can make the violin tell me about it."

"Are you fond of the violin?" Bridget asked.

"Fond of it! it is next to Anton and Nina; and it is my best friend. It puts me in a better

temper when I feel cross and angry that I should have lost my voice. Oh! it is hard to lose it. When I try to sing now, the blood is apt to come into my mouth. Not that I mind; many a time I have felt that I would rather die than lose my voice. And now it is gone, and Anton is gone, I am come here."

"You must try to feel at home with us," said Bridget, softening a little as she listened to the pathetic wail in Ria's voice.

The dark southern eyes turned on Bridget were dim with tears; but the little slight figure was drawn up from the depths of the chair, and Ria said:

"No; this is not home. I am only come for a little while; and I will go away as soon as I can. Anton will send me money; you know that."

"It will be all right," said Bridget. "I dare say we shall get on very well together, and we will take care of you and Nina. I will come back in an hour and see if you want anything;" and then she left the room.

When Bernard returned from his dinner at the Hall, he found Bridget alone, as he expected.

"Well," he said, "what are they like?"

"Like nothing you ever saw or heard of," Bridget said, laughing. "And you will be glad to know I have found my match. She, Anthony's wife, is a little dark, Italian-looking woman, with a will of her own, and an indomitable spirit. She does not require to be patronised or helped or looked after. I came home this afternoon deter-

mined to be kind to her—and she is kind to me!”

Bernard laughed. “Go on,” he said; “your descriptions are so vivid.”

“Well, there is a child of three years old, with fair hair and of the Rochemont type. Her mother calls her Nina, and spoils her; and she calls herself Ria, taking poor mother to task at tea for calling her *Ma-ria*, with the English accent. I found the door locked when I went after tea to see if they wanted anything; and as I knocked twice and no one answered, I left them to repose. The delicacy on which Anthony insisted so much is no fiction. The poor little thing looks frightfully delicate, and I was quite alarmed at her exhaustion when she had dragged that great child upstairs. She has a violin—imagine that!—and what the scraping will be through the length and breadth of this cottage! Well, patience is a cardinal virtue, and it is to be hoped I shall cultivate it. How did you get on at the Hall?”

“Very well. Janet and Claire looked so pretty, and the twins will be lovely in a year or two.”

“Did they say anything about Blake?”

“No; nothing particular, except how ill he looked; and then Mrs. Rochemont said how good it was of the poor fellow to undertake that mission to Anthony.”

“Yes,” Bridget said. “I never thought so much of Blake before; and at prayers just now he really touched me with his devotion. He seemed to bring down the very presence of God amongst us. I never heard anything like it before: he

quite upset mother, and she is gone to her room."

"It is wonderful how imaginative, nervous temperaments find the outcome of their enthusiasm in—well, religion."

"There is a reality in this," Bridget said. "When I was listening to Blake just now, I could only think of those words: 'Seeing Him, who is invisible.' And then I remembered, with self-reproach, how much it has been our fashion, mine especially, to look down on Blake; and here he is, rising far above me after all."

"Come, I am not going to allow that," said Bernard. "There will be a want of backbone in him to the end."

"Perhaps; but that may make the flight heavenward the easier," Bridget said.

"This is my last evening," Bernard went on, after a pause. "I start for Florence on the 3rd of September, and must get through some business at Ilminster first. I hope all is right between us, Bridget," he added. "I mean, I hope we shall always be friends, and that you will be kind to Ida. I should like to bring her here at Christmas."

Bridget did not immediately reply. There is perhaps nothing harder than to be offered, with some complacency, the ghost of a love, or a friendship which was once full of vitality and soul. To be obliged to accept the dry bones, instead of the living, breathing form; the hard outer crust or chance crumbs, instead of the bread which has been as the very flour of the wheat to us. There

may be some who read this to whom it is a riddle; some whose perceptions are not quick, and who may think that Bridget, having never had what we call a declaration of love from Bernard, had no cause for sorrow or complaint. But I feel sure, on the other hand there are many women who have suffered in this way; giving with the fullest purity of intention of their best to a man with whom, by circumstance or family connection, they are associated: women who can never tell their trouble, who have to bear it with a smile, and see what they accounted precious set at nought, while another takes the place they have held, as if it were the most easy and natural thing possible to change friends as we change gloves, and take leases of hearts as we take them of houses. I think there is comfort to those who are thus tried, in the thought that like as a father pitieth, so our dear Lord can pity us; and that the weaker we feel ourselves to be, or others think us, the more heavily may we lean on the changeless love of One who has said: "I am the Lord; I change not."

The great vantage-ground from which the children of God can look calmly on the troubles and pains of life, is never more distinctly defined than when these pains and troubles are of the secret heart, and may not be told to any earthly ear. Bridget's silence made Bernard turn suddenly and look at her. Her eyes met his, and perhaps in that moment what had been only a half-defined idea became a certainty. The friendship and interest and sympathy which had been so pleasant

to him had been a great deal more to her: and in that moment the reality of his position flashed on him. If he had lost her, what had he gained in her stead?

It all passed in far less time than I can write it here. With the direct sincerity of her nature, Bridget laid her hand in his, saying:

"You may be quite sure, Bernard, that I shall always be your friend—and hers too, for your sake."

He held her hand in a tight grasp and raised it to his lips with all the reverence and respect of his manhood; but he had not a word to say; and so they parted.

Bernard was off early the next morning to meet the coach at Rendlesham; so early that the dew was thick on the grass, and the sun had not dispersed the mists of the August morning. Bridget heard the sound of his footsteps as he went up the drive—the even steady tread she could have discerned amongst a thousand—and, burying her face in her pillow, she said:

"It is over now—the worst is over now—and it is well there is so much to do: what with Ria and Nina, and Blake's affairs, I shall have no time to be foolish, and that will be a good thing."

Bridget sprang up with a determined effort, and, after a brisk walk round the grounds and through the plantation, she returned to the Cottage for her day's work.

"Is Bernard gone?" Mrs. Rochemont asked,

when Bridget went, according to custom, to take her a cup of tea before she began dressing.

"Yes; he went off early. He walked to Rendlesham; he wants to reach Ilminster this afternoon."

"Ah, it seems a pity he should have gone into trade—for it is trade. Why, Bride, what noise is that?" And as she spoke, the plaintive wail of Ria's violin was heard.

"Dear me, it is the violin," Mrs. Rochemont said. "I cannot possibly be disturbed early by that dreadful noise. You must tell Maria, Bridget. You ought to have warned her; it is most inconsiderate."

Bridget did not speak, but stood by the window listening. The rooms at the Cottage were all very close together, and sounds were distinctly heard from one to another.

"Bridget, go and beg Maria to stop at once: it is too much. Why don't you go—why don't you speak?"

"I hear you, mother," said Bridget, in her calm way. "It is lovely music; but of course, if it disturbs you, it must be stopped."

She left the room, and then stood on the little landing, listening again. No instrument is so near akin to the human voice as the violin. Indeed, when played with the spirit as well as with the fingers, it is far before any voice, however clear the sound or wide the compass, without that spirit to quicken it. Bridget could not play on any instrument, but her soul could respond to

music like this. Maude's sonatas and long, intricate pieces, played with the pedal constantly down, and in one unimpassioned strain, were a weariness to her. While Ambrose stood by delighted, and Janet and Claire applauded, Bridget would scarcely listen, or, if she listened, only felt that it must come to an end, and there was nothing necessary but patience.

That Bridget was neither poetical nor musical became so well established as a family fact, that Anthony had refrained from saying much of his wife's musical powers, fearing that they would not make a point in her favour with his sister.

The family estimate of Bridget was a wrong one. She passed for a self-reliant woman, with great powers of administration in her, with a strong will and clear judgment. And she had all these characteristics; but deep hidden there was a spring of tenderness and emotion of which very few knew anything. Her father had known her best; for many a time, when his heavy sorrow about Anthony pressed sore upon him, Bride had showered on him tender sympathy and loving caresses, which made her his chief comforter. After his death, Bridget had withdrawn more into herself, and it was only to Bernard that she gave out of her inner storehouse filled with treasures, such as even he but dimly guessed. Now, as she knocked quietly at the door where she had knocked in vain the night before, Ria opened it wondering at the face which met hers, no longer bearing

its calm, cold expression, but instinct with life and animation.

"I have been listening to your music," she said quite forgetting her mother's injunction to beg it might cease to disturb her morning's nap. "I like it so much;—it is wonderful. What was it?"

"What was it?" Ria asked, with her dark eyes glistening. "Oh! it was nothing but my own fancy. I talk and cry, and love Anton and and Nina all through my dear viola; don't I, my *carissima, mia bella?*"

Little Nina made a dart at her mother as she heard these words, leaving her amusement of picking to pieces some flowers Bridget had placed on the dressing-table the day before.

"Here is thy aunt, my beloved. Kiss her, Nina." Nina looked up at Bridget for a moment, and then suddenly held out her arms, saying, "*Padre, dadda.*"

Bridget took the child for a minute, and kissed her.

"She sees what I saw at once," Ria said, "that you are like Anton—so like him!"

"Am I?" said Bridget, relapsing into her colder manner again. "I never heard I was particularly like Anthony before," she said.

"You are not half as beautiful to look at; but you are like, very like, except that she does not smile on thee, *mia piccola*. No one smiles on us here; but we will wait; smiles will come again."

Bridget now told Ria the breakfast hour was half-past eight, and added:

"Mother does not like to be disturbed early, as every sound is heard in this small house; will you please not play the violin before breakfast to-morrow."

"I *must* play it," Ria said passionately, "always—at all hours and times; I cannot live without it."

"I am sure you would not wish to annoy my mother, who is never strong; and I will make some arrangement for you, that you may enjoy that beautiful music in peace. There is a room built over the coach-house, which might be fitted up; I will see about it."

Ria's eyes had lost their softness now, and she only replied:

"We will make an arrangement, too—Nina and me. We will try to get away, and live alone, till Anton sends for us." And Bridget, afraid of losing her temper and having a scene, left the room.

This was not a very promising opening to Ria's visit to the Cottage; and before the day was over things had not improved.

"What am I to do with her, Madame?" Bridget asked the next day, when she went up to the Hall for an hour's talk with Mrs. Rochemont. "I am afraid it will be open warfare between mother and Ria to the end. It is the violin chiefly which makes trouble; yet it would be heartless to

deprive the poor girl of her one solace and comfort."

"I shall come down to the Cottage to-morrow, and see her, Bridget, and the little girl. Margaret and Mary and Christine are all eagerness to have her here to spend a day."

"Have you seen Blake to-day?" Bridget asked.

"Yes; he came up to see my husband, principally about Anthony's affairs. He is very good now about Claire, and says he is ready to leave things as they are."

"Which means a distinct promise that they will be married as soon as they can."

"Well," Madame said, her beautiful dark eyes glistening with emotion, "I feel more and more sure that Blake is truly a servant of our dear Lord and Master! and if my child loves him, why should I grudge to give her to him? But her father sees differently, and he must wait."

A few days passed, and the aspect of affairs did not improve. Blake went into Wychester, to prepare for his ordination by reading there with a clergyman; and Ria surprised every one by the vehemence of her grief at his departure.

"He loves Anton," she said; "and no one else here loves him; and he is kind and good. I cannot bear to be here without him."

"That is complimentary to us," Bridget said; "but as you will have to put up with us for an indefinite time, you must make the best of us, you see."

"I know the best of you," said Ria vehemently; "and I do not want to stay!"

And then, with a sudden spring to the door, Ria was gone.

"Passionate, impetuous little thing!" said Bridget. "I wonder where she is rushing off to now?"

Bridget was busy with her letters, and it was an hour before she went upstairs to get her hat, when, to her surprise, she met little Nina toddling, barefooted, from Ria's room.

"*Madre, mia*—mamma," said Nina, screwing up her eyes and beginning to open her mouth for a roar.

"I want mamma; Nina want mamma."

Bridget took the child in her arms, and found she had been lying for her morning sleep on the bed, rolled up in a red-striped shawl, which her mother often wore.

"Nina has been to sleep; she ought not to have come out into the passage. I must put on your shoes and socks; and I dare say mother will soon come back. Perhaps she is making her music in the room where she goes for fear of disturbing Grannie."

Bridget was unused to children, and talked to little three-year-old Nina as if she were twice that age, the child looking at her all the time with wide-open blue eyes; but she cried no more, and suffered Aunt Bride to dress her, and made no remonstrance when she proposed that they should go out together till her mother returned.

Bridget looked first for Ria in the room over the coach-house, which had been covered with an old Turkey carpet from the Bank House; but though the violin was there, Ria was not.

"We shall find her in the woods, perhaps," Bridget said, as she took little Nina's hand, turning once more into the Cottage to find a book, and then going towards the plantation with the child.

Nina amused herself by running along the grassy paths, and laughing as the little moths and yellow and white butterflies danced about in the rays of sunshine which made slanting lines of light through the openings in the trees. Then the child tumbled about on the soft grass, and gathered handfuls of the tiny flowers which were springing up here and there. Presently Bridget took her book, and seating herself on one of the deep benches which were placed at intervals through the plantation, began to read, then to think, then to read again. She was unused, as I have said, to children, and though her cousins at the Hall had been babies in her recollection, she had never concerned herself much about them. Thus she read and meditated, and all remembrance of Nina vanished. At last she came back to the present, and rising quickly, looked up the green path and down again, but saw no little figure playing amongst the flowers. "Nina, Nina!" she called; "Nina, *carissima*!" using the word familiar to the child from its mother's voice.

"Where can the child be gone? she was here not a minute ago."

It might seem not a minute to Bridget, but it was in reality much longer. She now roused herself, with all her wonted decision and energy, to look for the truant, plunging into the thick masses of bracken, calling "Nina!" in her clear, ringing voice, and startling a pheasant from its cover, as it rose close to her with a loud whir-r-r.

"She must have gone back to the Cottage," Bridget thought: and then she ran quickly to the white gate leading into the Cottage grounds; but as she had her hand on the latch, she saw it was impossible for the child to reach it. She stood irresolute for a moment, when she heard a footstep, and saw Mr. Miles coming down the drive.

"Have you seen little Nina?" she asked hurriedly; "my little niece? I have lost her, and her mother is gone, no one knows where; and the child has strayed away."

Mr. Miles was at her side in a moment.

"Which way has she gone?" he asked.

"I was sitting reading on that seat, and she was playing about on the grass; and when I looked up she was gone."

"She is too little to have wandered far," said Mr. Miles; "there can be no cause for anxiety."

"But I am dreadfully anxious, nevertheless. And her mother!—the very idea of what her mother will pour upon me for my carelessness is dreadful. And I shall deserve it," she added.

Mr. Miles began a vigorous search under every tree and bush, down every little hollow, and

beneath the bracken and brambles, Bridget calling from time to time, "Nina! little Nina!" her voice getting less and less steady as the minutes passed, and still no sign of the child.

"People are not allowed to pass through these plantations without the Squire's leave, are they?" Mr. Miles asked.

"No, oh no! Cousin Gabriel allows his friends to come in at the lower gate on the Rollestone Road, and ride or drive through, when it is not the game season. There is no fear of Nina being taken away. What noise is that?"

Turning round, Mr. Miles and Bridget saw an advancing figure, with clouds of dark hair floating behind her, and her arms outstretched.

"My child—my Nina! Where is she? what have you done with her? It will kill me—it will kill me; and then you will be glad. Oh, you are wicked to take away my child! Nina, *bambina mia*! Oh, Anton! Oh, you wicked Bridget!"

A great passion of tears burst forth, and Ria sank down exhausted and breathless.

Mr. Miles raised her gently, and lifted her on the bench, saying firmly:

"Hush—do not excite yourself thus; the child cannot be far off. We will get the servants to help in the search, if you will try to be quiet."

"Oh, I can't be quiet—I can't," poor Ria said, struggling to her feet. "And I have been to Rollestone, to tell the people there I would teach music—the violin—for I must—must leave them here. They do not love Anton, or me, or Nina—Nina!"

They were joined now by some of the servants from the Cottage, who had heard the mother's wild cry when she went into the room where she had left Nina and found the bed empty.

No one there had seen Bridget go out with the child, and Mrs. Rochemont was astonished when Ria rushed in on her asking for Nina. Old Hickes and Sam and Katherine were all sure the little one would soon turn up. Tom was despatched in one direction, Hickes in another, while Mr. Miles and Bridget went in a third, and Katherine was left with poor Ria, who had been sufficiently exhausted by her expedition to Rolleston on the top of one of the coaches from Rendlesham, and her walk of three miles back. She was coughing violently, and tottered when she tried to follow Mr. Miles and Bridget.

They walked on silently, looking over the ground again carefully, and calling the child from time to time.

After an hour had been thus spent, Bridget came to a halt.

"It is too dreadful, if by my carelessness any harm has happened to this child."

Mr. Miles took her hand in his, and drew it through his arm, saying:

"I am so sorry for you!"

"Thanks," she said faintly; but as is often the case, a word of sympathy is like the drop to the full cup, and she dare not say more till she had rallied herself. After a pause, she said:

"I have been, as Ria says, so wicked about

all this, so unforgiving and hard about Anthony, so angry that they were sent here, Ria and poor little Nina. You would not believe what horrid thoughts I have had; and I have had—I mean, I have been so much occupied in—— well, another trouble; and I feel that has been a sort of under-current flowing on within, and turning everything into bitterness.”

“Take the trouble,” Mr. Miles said, “with all others, to the great Healer. You know how the waters of Marah were sweetened, don’t you?”

“I know,” said poor Bridget. “Yes, I know; but I don’t *feel*.”

“Ah!” he said, “I understand. I have been through it all.”

“You?”

“Yes; while I only knew—as you say—with the head, I went on well enough at Cambridge; but when I *felt*, why, then I wished to get hold of a parish, and try to do something towards helping others to feel too—God helping me.”

“Let us go on now,” Bridget said; “we must try to find her. Surely we *must* find her soon. Poor little Nina!”

After long and fruitless search Mr. Miles and Bridget turned towards the Cottage once more, the mystery unexplained, and little Nina was nowhere to be found.

The scene at the cottage was not likely to restore Bridget’s composure. Mrs. Rochemont was lamenting and helpless; while Ria was lying, utterly exhausted, on the sofa, her large dark eyes gazing

intently, as if seeking her child, and her breath coming in short, fitful gasps, which showed what the distress and exertion had done for her.

"We have sent into Rolleston for Mr. Earle," Mrs. Rochemont said. "O Bride, how could you be so careless! Why did you take the child out at all? It is so trying; and I am not in a state of health to bear such anxiety and distress. It really does surprise me, Bridget, that you should have been like yourself at all of late. Ambrose notices it, and so does Maude. So dreamy and absent, and thinking everything a trouble."

This from Mrs. Rochemont was a striking instance of the self-deception so common—rather the self-delusion—of weak natures, who are invariably hard upon their own faults when they see them in others, though never recognising them as their own!

Bridget knew her mother better than Mr. Miles did, who shrugged his shoulders with an impatient gesture, and moving an armchair towards Bridget said:

"We seem to forget that you must be as much to be pitied as any one."

The kind words and the sympathetic tone in which they were spoken, gave Bridget a choking in her throat, and she had great difficulty in repressing her tears.

The doctor was the first arrival. He looked grave, and said there must be perfect quiet and more air. He opened both windows and door, and the colour returned to Ria's pale face. Sud-

denly her eyes dilated, and her breath came quick and short, while she moved her head from the pillow.

"Hark!" she said. "I hear her."

And as she spoke there was the sound of a firm heavy tread, and the Squire came in with little Nina in his arms.

"A lost child!" he exclaimed, cheerily; "what—have you all been very much scared?" he asked, looking round the little room, which his broad, stalwart figure seemed to fill.

"Mam—*madre!*" little Nina said in a half-crying voice, throwing herself out of the Squire's arms on to the sofa. The poor mother held out her arms, and then the child was clasped in an embrace which lasted till the doctor lifted Nina gently from her resting-place, and said:

"Stand back, she has fainted."

When Ria at last regained consciousness, she found herself lying in her bed, and everything around her very still. She moved a little, and said:

"Nina!"

Then the curtain of the pretty bed was gently drawn aside, and Ria looked up at a face which was new to her—a gentle face, with dark, lustrous eyes gazing down on her with sympathetic tenderness. The sick and the sad in East Repton were no strangers to that loving, pitying gaze, nor to the touch of the white hand now laid upon Ria's brow, as Madame Rochemont said, with a smile, "Nina is asleep; would you like to see her?"

Then, raising the counterpane, she displayed the little sunny head resting quietly by her mother's side, one dimpled fat hand folded under the rounded chin, and the curled lashes lying upon the flushed cheek of the little truant.

Ria gave a long sigh of relief, and then asked:

"Who are you? Every one is strange here, and I have never seen you before."

"Oh, yes. I came down from the Hall to see you; only you ran away from me, and would not speak to me."

"Ah! I know. I thought you were so grand a grand lady. They call you Madame, don't they?"

"Bridget calls me so, and my dear people in the village; it pleases them."

"Yes; and they all love you, I know. Tell me how she was lost, and if it was not Bridget's fault. Ah, I do *not* love Bridget; she is so hard, and holds herself so high above me."

"I will tell you how Nina was found. She strayed away from poor Bride in the wood. No one could be more distressed than Bridget was. One of the keepers found your darling, and carried her home to his cottage; and then my husband, who was passing, saw her, and brought her up to the Hall, and asked me whose little one she was."

"And you knew!" Ria exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I knew. And I made my husband

hasten away to the Cottage, while I followed more slowly."

"What made you come?"

"I came because I thought I might be of use, and also because I have wished to know you."

"To know *me*! Anton's poor little Ria, whom they don't want, whom they despise. That is why I went to Rollestone. I went to say I would give lessons on the violin to any one. And I have had it written on cards, and put in the shop-windows, and if I get pupils, why then I will take a dear little room hanging over the sea, where the woman was—oh! so kind to me; and Nina and I will go and live there and wait — wait for Anton."

Madame smiled at the eager, expressive face turned up to her, and telling her she must give her the medicine Mr. Earle had ordered, and that she must lie quiet for the rest of the evening, she bent down to kiss her. Then Ria flung her arms round her new friend and said brokenly:

"You are good and kind to me. I will try to be patient; and, oh! will you tell them to let me go and live in Rollestone? I know I could get on; and Anton said it was only for a year. They say my heart is wrong; I heard that doctor say so to-day. If it is, shall I die before Anton comes? I don't want to die—here—alone, without him."

"I trust, with care, you will get stronger," Madame said; "but you must not run off to Rollestone again, and exhaust your strength. You must come up to the Hall, and bring Nina with you."

My little Christine will be pleased to have a baby to play with."

"Ah, you are so good!" Ria said. "I am not good, as I tell you. Then when kind Blake talks on and on about loving God and the Bible, and how everything is sin, and that we must love God—I can't, I don't know how."

"My dear," Madame said, "if you asked little Nina to love you, would it not be strange?"

"Nina! ah, but you are laughing at me now. Ask my own child to love me—she who comes to me for everything!"

"Yes; for everything," Madame said. "And so in trusting love we must go to God for everything. As a proof of it, go to Him for forgiveness of sin, and for all that is good and holy and true; go to Him to be made like Him as we see Him in Jesus Christ, who came to live for us and die for us."

"Yes," Ria said, "I see;—it is beautiful." Then her eyelids closed wearily, and with another kiss, Madame left her.

"What is to be done with this wild creature?" Mrs. Rochemont said helplessly, when Madame returned to the drawing-room. "It is really *too* much. Maude says that Miss Parker told her there is a card in two of the shop-windows in Rollestone: 'Lessons on the violin given by Maria Lucia Rochemont. For terms, apply to the Cottage, East Repton.' Think of what people will say. Poor Maude was telling me that Mrs. Lennard is coming to stay with her to-morrow; and it will be

very unpleasant for her to see these notices in Rollestone. The violin, too! such an unladylike instrument; and altogether it is just another step downwards for the family. I am so ashamed, and Bridget is most provoking about it."

"I think poor Anthony's wife has done this with the best intentions, not liking to be a burden on you," said Madame Rochemont. "The motive is praiseworthy, if the act itself is impetuous and ill-considered. I feel sure Ria will not be able to carry out her plans of giving lessons in Rollestone: so it is better to be gentle with her, and not act harshly."

"And meantime all the neighbourhood will see her ridiculous advertisements, and then the story of her poor husband's trouble will be brought to light again, and there will be endless talk and gossip. Dear me, I am sure you must be thankful you have no trials like mine. What is my poor Blake's attachment to your Claire in comparison with *my* anxieties and sorrows?"

"Every heart knows its bitterness," Madame said gently; "but there is a good reason for all our trials. They do not come to us by chance."

"Oh, yes; that is my dear Blake's doctrine. It is well when people can accept it. I am too tired and overcome by all the excitement Ria's folly has caused me, to enter into it now."

Madame bid her cousin good-bye with a sad and grave expression on her sweet face, and promising to return in the morning to see Ria, she left the Cottage.

CHAPTER VI.

MOVEMENT AND CHANGE.

"Oh! mein Geist, ich fühle es in mir, strebt nach etwas Ueberirdischem, das keinem Menschen gegönnt ist."

TIECK.

"I HAVE made up my mind it is the best thing to do," the Squire said one evening, when he and his wife were left together in the pretty sitting-room at the Hall. "I have made up my mind, my love; and we will start on the 1st of November. The girls will gain more by seeing new places and new countries than from any mere books; and then there is Claire; we shall see what it will do for her."

"Ah, Gabriel, I do not think her attachment to poor Blake will ever be shaken; she is as firm as a rock in this matter."

The Squire gave an impatient whistle.

"Well, well, we shall see. There is no authorised engagement, and I am not going to let my pretty sunbeam go and waste her brightness out in the wilds of Africa. Why, Grace, it would break your heart, I know well enough—though you are so brave now. The change will do you good, too; and how you will delight in the mountains! I was only a lad when I went to Switzerland with my poor father—it was the year we

tried Nice for Bridget—but I have never forgotten the sunsets on the snow peaks. We will go to Florence and Rome, and come back in the spring through Switzerland.”

Mrs. Rochemont smiled rather sadly at her husband's scheme. She knew well enough that he would very soon tire of foreign travel, and wish himself back amongst his broad acres and his own people. But she knew also when the Squire had taken an idea into his head, he would carry it out; and his present idea was that travelling would be the best cure for Claire's love, and that she would then give up all thoughts of marrying her cousin Blake.

There was not much time to make preparations and to arrange for leaving the Hall. Three of the old servants were to be left in charge, and Mrs. Searle, the housekeeper, was to answer all the calls made on her by the village people in her mistress's absence. But, “Aye, dear” one old woman sighed out to Mr. Miles, “it won't seem Christmas-like, without Madame Rochemont; and there—I don't think any good ever comes when the gentry go off to foreign parts. I remember when the old Squire took Miss Bridget away, and came home without her; it don't answer, depend on it.” Mr. Miles heard the same opinion from all the poor folk, to whom Madame Rochemont was an ever-ready friend, and he found it very difficult to administer consolation; but he was wholly unprepared for the burst of passionate lamentation with which Ria greeted him, soon after the Roche-

monts' departure had been publicly made known, and the day fixed when the old Hall should be left to unwonted stillness and the falling of autumn leaves.

Ria's health seemed to have broken down most perceptibly since that day of her excursion to Rollestone and Nina's loss. She spent much of her time in the room over the coach-house, where a large wood fire was always kept blazing. The room had been warmly curtained and carpeted by Madame Rochemont, and made cosy by furniture from the Hall: antique, old-fashioned furniture collected from the large lumber-room at the top of the Hall, but in harmony with the little occupant of the low-pitched room, with her quaint dress and dark hair—sometimes plaited round her small head in a coronet, sometimes left to fall over her shoulders and enveloping her in a cloud. Here, with her violin and her child, Ria passed many hours; and here Nina would play with the scarlet leaves of the Virginia creeper wreathing the windows, which she would climb up to the deep recess to gather. It grew to be the custom for her to have her meals there, and only to go into the Cottage at night, when Nina went to bed. The coach-house was connected with a little gallery which ran at the back of the Cottage by a narrow passage, and thus it was easy of access.

Mr. Miles paid several visits to this strange room, where Anthony's wife had found an asylum. Since the day that he had used every effort to

find the lost Nina, Ria's heart had turned to him, and thus it was that she poured forth her grief at Madame Rochemont's departure without reserve.

The firelight was dancing on the wall, and casting fantastic shadows on the low ceiling of Ria's room, one November afternoon, when Bridget came in to pay her accustomed visit.

"Not playing?" Bridget said. "I have not heard a note to-day."

"I am too unhappy even to tell my violin about it," Ria said; "and, Bride, I have a question I want to ask you. I asked it of dear Madame, and she will not answer it. She said it was painful to give unnecessary pain; but I think *you* will not be afraid to tell me."

Bridget understood the implied rebuke, and said coldly:

"Well, let me hear."

"Did—did Anton, my husband, do anything wrong—very wrong, I mean? I want to know. You all call him 'poor Anton,' when you speak of him. You never write to him: only Blake has written once; and I want to know—to *know* why you cast him off."

Bridget hesitated before she spoke, and Ria repeated, "Why do you cast him off? He told me his relations were not kind to him," Ria continued; "that they did not love him, because he was not fortunate, and had lost money. It was *this* that made me love him first so much. I said, if no one loved him, I would love him; and he has been

—oh! so good to me, his little Ria.” Bridget was moved to something like scorn for the man who could thus gain his wife under false pretences, and admiration for the steadfastness of the love which Ria lavished on her brother, as she continued: “Nothing could change my love for him. Even if I could believe that he was not good. Only I want to *know*.”

“Anthony gave my father a great deal of trouble,” Bridget said; “and his leaving his home and his friends was entirely his own fault.”

“Yes, so *you* say; but does every one say so? Is every one so hard on him?”

“I am not hard, Ria—you must not say so—I am only just. I really hope, from what you say, that my brother has been kind and considerate to you; and that is a sign of amendment. I feel it difficult sometimes to forgive Anthony; but when I look at you and Nina, I think it seems easier. I am really anxious to make up to you for Madame’s loss. We are left very much to ourselves now at East Repton, with the Hall deserted, and Maude and Ambrose gone into winter quarters. So we ought to be good friends, Ria.”

Ria’s dark eyes were still wistful, and she replied in a tone which was dissatisfied:

“I must wait till Anton comes home, and then he will tell me everything.”

“I thought he was to send for you,” said Bridget; “but we need not talk more of it now, as such a short time has passed.”

“You hope he *will* send for me,” said Ria.

"Yes, I know you would not like him to come here. No one loves him—it is what I say."

Bridget was now called away to her mother, a visitor having arrived; and little Nina was carried off by Katherine to taste some dainty she had prepared for her tea.

Ria was left alone in the gathering shadows of the November afternoon. A sense of loneliness oppressed her, and a craving for her husband; for with the true instinct of womanhood her heart clung more closely to him, now that she found he was held in light esteem by his family. Her life had been one of many changes—a short life, for Ria was scarcely four-and-twenty: and she had a remarkably youthful way of looking at things. Quick and ardent and impulsive, she had never been accustomed to self-control; and as on the first evening of her arrival at the Cottage she had been entirely unconscious of any *gêne* or restraint, so she was, after some weeks' residence with her husband's relations, just as little concerned as to the impression she made on them, or what they thought of her.

Mrs. Rochemont troubled herself very little about her. The objectionable placards were withdrawn from the Rollestone shop-windows before many eyes had seen them; but, notwithstanding, the report spread that Anthony Rochemont's wife had been a music mistress, that she was very eccentric, and altogether a trial to the family, and that she was not a person who could be visited. Hence little Ria lived a life apart in the rooms

allotted to her; and as the days grew cold and short, she seldom left the house, and was therefore rarely seen even by the village people.

Mrs. Rochemont had administered a lecture to her about the advertisement cards in the Rolleston shop, and had said a good deal about the name she bore, an honourable name, and that she must remember what was due to it. To which Ria replied that her mother's family was noble—for was she not a relative of the Marchesi Caraccio?—and that her father was good, and would have been an honour to any one to own as a relation.

Mrs. Rochemont found that to shake Ria's faith when she once trusted was impossible, and it was too much trouble to try to do so. Care must be taken that Ria did nothing else that was ridiculous and eccentric, and that she was kept out of sight of the neighbourhood; and above all care must be taken that the violin was never played except in the room set apart for it and never by any chance in the early morning, before Mrs. Rochemont thought it time to leave her bed.

Of little Nina, on the contrary, her grandmother was rather proud; and she would exhibit her to visitors, and liked to hear the praises of her beauty, and the declaration that she was "a perfect little Rochemont."

The violin told but a sad tale in the gathering twilight, when at last Ria's little hand drew the bow over the strings. All the most pathetic airs

which Ria's voice once sung were now reproduced by the violin; and nothing so much brings the musician to the listener, as the notes which are kindled into life by the sympathetic player on this instrument. All the Italian airs of Verdi, Rossini and Balfe were in Ria's exhaustless repertoire; and this afternoon, as she was bringing out the melancholy wail of "Ah! che la morte!" the tears which had been long gathering fell fast. She was unconscious that the door had opened gently and that Mr. Miles had come in; and before she noticed it he stood before her.

"Oh, is it you!" she said; but not till the very last note had died away. "I am glad—for I am sad and tired. I have not had the letter from Madame she promised, and not one word from Anton yet; it is all so lonely!"

"I have brought you something that will cheer you," Mr. Miles said. "I heard from Madame this morning, and she enclosed this note for you."

"O, how glad I am!" Ria said, taking the sheet of thin foreign paper and kissing it. "Yes, I am glad! But I shall not read it till you are gone—it would be two good things at once, you know."

The smiles were chasing away the tears now, and Ria's visitor watched her with interest.

"Talk to me," she said; "tell me how to be patient, tell me how to be good."

It was with the most perfect and direct simplicity that Ria spoke. There was no affectation

of any sort about her, and Mr. Miles felt this as he said tenderly:

"My poor child! You want what we all must want, sooner or later, the forgiveness of the transgression of God's law, through One who kept that law for us, and died that we might know what infinite love means."

"Ah! but I cannot see what you mean. Madame talked to me like that, and I ought to see, but I can't."

Mr. Miles said gently:

"Then pray those words which are familiar to us all: 'Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord.'

The dark eyes which were shining in the bright firelight seemed to catch a gleam of hope.

"If only I could get an answer; if only God would hear me—make me good—and bring Anton home! Tell me how shall I get through all the long, dark months, that are coming? I cannot go out—it takes away my breath and makes me cough; and there is so little sunshine. The skies are all so grey here in England. Ah! did you ever see an Italian sky?" she asked, clasping her hands, "hanging over beautiful Florence, with all the campaniles standing up against it, and the white doves flying through the air, and the crimson and blue flowers growing in the gardens of the palaces? The City of Flowers, you know."

"Yes, I have been at Florence," Mr. Miles said, "long ago, when I was young. The eastern coast of England is certainly cold and dreary when

compared to it ; but there are dark days even in Florence."

"Perhaps !" Ria said, doubtfully ; and Mr. Miles went on :

"The sun, you know, is always shining, though we don't always see it. So it is with God. He is ever sending forth His light and His truth to lead us to His holy hill ; but we let earthly clouds—our trials, our weaknesses, our losses, our pleasures, our sorrows, and griefs—hide Him from us ; and then we grope on, shivering and cold and sad, when all the time He is waiting to warm and gladden us. For there is no happiness like the happiness which comes from living in His presence and striving to do His will."

"Well," Ria replied, "I ought to understand, for Blake and Madame and you try to make me ; and you are so kind. Mrs. Rochemont and Bridget don't care about me, nor Ambrose and his pretty wife. I am just nothing to them. Do you know, I think if I had something to do, I should be happier ; the days would not be so long. My Nina wants so little, and I have made her her winter dress ; and as for me, I want no dress. I do very well as I am, up here in this nest. Can you find me something to do ?"

Mr. Miles always liked a practical side to a question, and after thinking a minute, he said :

"To do ! Yes, I believe I can. There is a blind boy, the son of a farmer in the parish, who loves music, and I heard him hammering out some hymn tunes on an old piano the other day.

Would you like me to bring him here, and will you teach him to play?"

"I will see him first, and then I will judge," Ria said, a little doubtfully. "Will he be a big, rough boy?"

"No, indeed: but I will bring him for you to see, for he cannot see you, and then you shall decide. Think how good it will be, if you can brighten his dark life by music; think if you can help him to something that will be a cheer and comfort to him."

"Well, I will try," said Ria. "When will you bring the boy, and what is his name?"

"His name is Walter Day, and I will bring him to-morrow, if I have time; if not, the next day."

"Walter Day," Ria repeated, in her sweet, musical voice. "Walter—we call that Gualtiero in Italian; and Day—day is Giorno. What a pretty name!"

Mr. Miles was well satisfied to have kindled an interest in the blind boy under any name; and when little Nina returned in Katherine's arms, her eyes heavy with sleep, and murmuring, "*Madre mia, mia*," as she nestled into her mother's close embrace, he bid her good-bye.

As Mr. Miles passed the little room on the groundfloor of the Cottage, which Bridget appropriated, he saw through the open door that she was sitting on the rug by the fire. The sound of his footsteps made her spring up, and she said:

"Come in, and see my room. It was my father's, and all these books were collected by him."

Mr. Miles looked round on the closely-packed shelves, and said :

"It seems a nice collection of books. And here is your portrait hanging over the writing-table !"

"Mine ! oh, no ; that is the other Bridget. If I bring the candle nearer, you will see how much better looking she was. That is a beautiful face."

"Who was the other Bridget ?"

"My father's cousin at the Hall. She died of consumption, and is buried in the English cemetery at Nice. My father used to talk to me of her often, and gave me her name. We were alike in many ways, I think ; name and circumstances too. She was just my age when she died. There is a little book here she used ; and my father wrote my name in it, with a trembling hand, not long before he died. I will show it to you. I don't know that any one else, except—except my cousin, Bernard Wentworth, has ever seen it."

Bridget unlocked a drawer in the table, and took out a small, old-fashioned edition of Wordsworth which was lined and marked with dates in many places. On the blank page was written :

"Bridget Rochemont, from her Cousin Ambrose, on her birthday. With love and best wishes." Beneath came the other inscription, thirty-

five years later: "Given to my daughter, in memory of the other Bridget, whose steps may she follow, into whose rest may she enter."

"Ah!" Bridget said, "she was my father's early and first love and though they were separated, and obliged to stop all intercourse with each other, he never forgot her. It was a sad story; but I dare say there are thousands like it. Her mother wished her to marry the Lord Brackstone of those days, and Bridget would not consent. Then her health broke down, and the end soon came. My father was the best and kindest of husbands and fathers. I wish you had known him."

"I wish I had," said Mr. Miles, unable to resist the attraction of a deep arm-chair, into which he sank, still holding the old Wordsworth in his hand.

"He was so much to me," Bridget went on; "and since he died, the tide of loss has set in. Everything seems to have failed me—except health," she said, with a sudden smile; "and perhaps that will go next, as Cousin Bride's did; only I hope they won't take me out to Nice; I would rather die here."

"You are to live long," Mr. Miles said, "and do good service in the world, I hope."

"I don't know," Bridget said. "The Rochemonts are given to go down hill very fast when they begin, and their troubles of all kinds seem to run in grooves. I mean, one generation repeats the other."

As she spoke, she was looking earnestly at

the sweet, serious eyes of the Bridget who had been at rest for so many years, and something of the grace and sadness of the picture seemed reflected in the living Bridget from the dead.

"Give me the book, please," she said at last, taking it from Mr. Miles's hand. "I always keep it in this drawer, and no one but myself ever touches it."

"Thank you, for letting me see it," Mr. Miles said.

"And what did you hear from Ria, to-day?" Bridget asked, suddenly changing her tone. "She is such an incomprehensible little mortal."

"I have thought of a blind boy, for her pupil on the violin. Won't that be a good plan? The poor little thing wants occupation."

"Yes, I dare say she does; she is such a strange mixture of childishness and womanliness: the last shown by her devotion to her child and faith in her husband. He cannot be wrong in her eyes; and when she is convinced, against her will, that my poor brother is not what she thinks he is, she will love him all the same. Nothing will shake her confidence, nothing will change her love."

"There is something beautiful in that," Mr. Miles said: "to love through all changes and all failings is the Divine element which earthly love so often misses."

"Poor little Ria!" Bridget sighed. "I wish I could feel I was any good to her; but she is, somehow, always on the defensive with me. Ma-

dame loved her, and you like her: so the fault must be in me."

"I had a letter from Madame to-day," Mr. Miles said, "dated from Florence; and she enclosed a note for your sister-in-law, which I left her to enjoy in peace."

"Madame has not written to me," Bridget said. "I have heard from Claire and Janet, but letter-writing is not their special gift. What does Madame say?"

"It is principally about the people in the village, and not generally interesting; but I think I have it here;" and Mr. Miles foraged in the depths of his pockets, and at last drew out the thin lilac envelope, addressed in Madame's clear hand.

"Would you like to read it?" Mr. Miles said, handing the letter to Bridget. "I must take it again, because there are so many directions in it. Madame has gained one point for me from the Squire, to get two of the cottages by Money's Corner pulled down. It is perfectly appalling to think of the number of inmates in each of them, and only a few inches of air admitted."

Bridget was now engrossed in Madame's letter, and left Mr. Miles to his meditations upon the badly ventilated cottages and the steps necessary to be taken to stamp out the low fever which hung about persistently in the district called Money's Corner. The inhabitants of this part of East Repton lived from hand to mouth in a mixed crowd. The women hoed potato-grounds, sowed

turnips, and did a good deal of out-door work; the men, who were for the most part an idle, hybrid tribe, fished in the season at Rollestone, and the nearer chine, stretching down from the Cottage, and known as Little Repton; or got a day's work here or there at the coal ships which put into Rollestone; but often lounged about with short pipes in their mouths, and furry caps—which suggested their origin in the Squire's plantations—stuck askance on their heads.

It was to these people at Money's Corner that Mr. Miles directed his efforts.

"I fear you will find them very hopeless indeed," gentle Madame Rochemont had said. "They are a shifting people, and it seems difficult to get any hold on them. You may succeed, however."

Mr. Miles was determined to succeed, and no rebuffs or failures discouraged him—not even when one of the big fellows, of whom he thought the best, was taken up before the Rendlesham magistrates for knocking down one of the Squire's keepers, and, instead of expressing any contrition, said he would do it again for a shilling! Big Bill Brownson was one of the men down with the fever, and Mr. Miles was looking after him every day. His visits were frequent to the low sloping garret in the thatched roof, where Bill slept with two brothers, and where the pure breath of heaven entered by a hole scarcely six inches square.

But Mr. Miles was not so far lost in thought about Bill Brownson and his sanitary schemes for

Money's Corner that he was unconscious of Bridget's presence. Indeed, he soon found his mind had, like his eyes, centred on the kneeling figure before the fire. The light of the wax candle made a soft line of brightness on the smooth, closely-plaited hair, as the small, well-shaped head was bent over the letter. Presently the letter fell unheeded from Bridget's hand, and the eyes—so like the eyes of the Bridget over the writing-table—were gaping wistfully into the fire.

"What is she thinking about, I wonder," Mr. Miles said to himself; and yet he did not move or speak, afraid to break the spell. The silence lasted for some time. The wind sighed and moaned in the branches of the Scotch fir-trees near the Cottage, and a heavy ground-swell was booming at the foot of the low sandstone cliff down in Little Repton; and still Bridget retained her half-kneeling position on the rug. As Mr. Miles watched her, he saw her head droop lower, and he even thought there were tears trembling on the curled lashes.

"Well," he said at last, "I must go, I think. Have you finished the letter?"

"The letter!" Bridget said, starting up. "Oh, yes; thank you very much for letting me see it. I think they all seem very happy; and I hope Blake will be allowed to go and see them at Easter. Madame mentions him very kindly."

The sad ring in Bridget's voice did not escape Mr. Miles's ear, made sensitive, at it was, by sympathy and interest.

He lingered a little, and when he took Bridget's hand at parting, he held it for a moment in his.

"We must do all we can for Money's Corner," she said brightly. "I am going into Wycheater next week, to help Maude to preside over her first dinner-parties. I will try to get something out of Ambrose for all your schemes. The Squire's notions are of the old sort, though he has the kindest heart——"

"I am sure he has," Mr. Miles said. "When are you going, do you say?"

"On Tuesday, I think. I rather like a few days in Wycheater. I go to the cathedral service for one thing, and I enjoy the old Bank House, too, full of the memories of my childhood and youth."

"Your youth!" Mr. Miles said, laughing.

"Yes, my youth; I feel quite middle-aged, now, whatever you may think."

"Then what am I?" he said quickly.

"What you feel and seem," she answered; "a great deal younger than I am; besides, when I like people, I never think of their age."

Mr. Miles walked away with those words in his ear—"when I like people."

Was he one of the people she liked, and whose age she never thought of? As he took long strides through the muddy lanes, and at last let the Vicarage-gate swing behind him, he meditated much on Bridget, and wondered what the trouble was of which she had given him some

hints, and which by instinct he felt had been in her mind as she read Madame's letter and let it drop listlessly from her hand.

Mr. Miles seated himself before the lamp in his comfortable study and addressed himself to the letter for the second time. "Ah!" he said at last, "here is a postscript—always the most important part of a woman's letter. Let us see;" and then he read, "I shall be writing to my Cousin Bridget, in a day or two; if you see her and Mrs. Rochemont, will you tell them Mr. Wentworth left his card on us the other day; but when my husband went to find him out, he was told he had left Florence."

"I think," Mr. Miles said, as he refolded the letter, "that her trouble is in some way connected with that man. She is changed of late, and she is so much less self-reliant and high-spirited."

Then some words of his friend Mr. Freeman recurred to the Vicar, and with a smile he leaned back in his chair. He again fell into musing, which was broken at last by his housekeeper's entrance, with Tom's brother, prepared to lay a little side-table ready for his solitary dinner.

Maude Rochemont came springing down the wide staircase in the Bank House, to meet her sister-in-law. "Oh, I am so glad you have come, Bride! now I feel that I shall get on. You must write the *menu* and tell me who is to take me down to dinner, and save me from making any mistakes which would annoy Ambrose. Blake is coming; is not that good of him?"

"Good! I don't see that it is good at all; of course he ought to come."

"I only meant, as he was reading so hard, it was kind of him to spare the evening here. You are to have your own old room, Bridget."

"Thanks," Bridget said. "It all looks very like home."

"It is a dear old house," Maude said; "and I like being at Wychester. I see so much more of Ambrose, and it is so nice to have him always at hand. I like old Uncle Anthony very much; and he likes me to pay him a visit in his room sometimes."

"I have no doubt he does," Bridget said. "You are a refreshing person to come across, Maude; you are always pleased with everything."

Maude's wide-open blue eyes looked straight into Bridget's.

"Life is very sweet and beautiful to me now, Bride," she said simply. "Until I had Ambrose, I did not know what happiness really was. And he is so kind and indulgent, allows me to take the district I wished; and he lets me go to evening service at St. Matthew's whenever I like. Blake often comes for me, and brings me back."

The day after Bridget's arrival was very full of business. As was usual wherever she found herself, all arrangements fell upon her. Maude admired everything, and expressed the greatest satisfaction, and Ambrose, when the guests were gone, said:

"Nothing could have gone off better, thanks

to Bridget. I think the decorations of barberries quite wonderful. The Dean's wife, poor soul, is not very wise, and she said— 'How lovely Mrs. Rochemont's coral ornaments are!' And you have some in your hair, Bride. I must say, I agree with Mrs. Dean, that they look like coral."

Maude was flitting about the room blowing out wax candles, and then she rang the bell.

"What are you ringing for, Maude?" her husband asked.

"For prayers," Maude said gently.

"Prayers! Oh, the servants will be too tired and too busy clearing up. Better not have any prayers to-night; it is nearly eleven."

"I think, Ambrose, I should like to have prayers; and I will tell James those of the servants who are too tired, need not come."

As she spoke the bell below rang, and they went down to the dining-room, where prayers were read every night by the head of the house.

Not one of the servants was absent; and when the short service was over, Maude went up to her husband and kissed him, whispering:

"Thank you so much; now I am going to bed."

When Ambrose and Bridget were left alone, Ambrose said:

"She is a good little thing; just one of the people to whom faith and good works come as to their own place."

"Yes," Bridget said with a sigh. "It seems easy for such people, people like Maude, to be

good; though we ought not to say that, for every one has special difficulties in the way, and something that it is hard to overcome."

"Sit down, Bride," Ambrose said; "I wanted to ask you if you had heard from Bernard lately."

"No, I have not," said Bridget; "I know nothing about him."

"Neither do I," said Ambrose; "and I think it is strange he has not announced his marriage to us, and I have not seen it in the *Times*. This is the beginning of December, and he was to be married in October, I thought. It is awkward for me, as you know he has borrowed money from us, and cheques come in drawing on his account here for the firm of Rotherhithe & Wentworth. I hope the whole affair is not a bubble."

"You may be quite sure all Bernard's intentions are honourable," Bridget said decidedly, almost sharply. "I saw that he had left Florence, in a letter Mr. Miles showed me from Madame."

"What did Madame say?"

"Only that he had called on them, and when Cousin Gabriel went to return his visit, he found he had left Florence."

"Well, I think it is very odd," Ambrose said. "He ought to write to me, if to no one else. I don't understand it."

Nor did Bridget understand it either. Day after day she had watched the return of Tom from the post-office. Day after day had she eagerly glanced at the letters, as she took them from the

bag, and there was every writing but the one she wanted to see. I think the very certainty of Bernard's marriage would have been a relief to her: and yet she was still uncertain. Not a line had any of the family received from him since he left the Cottage on the evening of Ria's arrival there.

There are very few of us in these days who do not know what watching for the post and for letters that never come implies: the daily sickening disappointment, and the consequent depression. Then, as the day wears on, and evening closes in, we think the morning will soon be here now, and then surely there will be a letter—and we go to bed almost cheerfully, feeling that joy will come for us in the morning, with the words we hunger for that tell us absence is not separation, that distance is not recognised by true hearts. And so the day comes round again, and the post arrives, and the letters lie in a little heap. One glance is enough—the letter we wished for is not amongst them. Or perhaps—and this is almost worse—when at last the familiar writing is there, and externally the letter is the same as those we have opened so often, with the certainty of finding in them sympathy and response and affection—we read instead a few short, dry, conventional lines, written with the hand indeed, but without the soul, so that the longed-for letter is like a well-remembered landscape with no sun to give it life and beauty! How does this subtle, intangible something which makes things that are the same not the same, fall upon the heart with a cold chill, which seems to

turn into ice the warm springs of tenderness and love!

So do our earthly hearts confess, as year by year passes, and change upon change rolls over us, like the billows of an advancing tide. Ah! do we not know, or *will* we not see, that there is one with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning; and that in His presence, here or hereafter, there *is* and shall be the very fulness of joy!

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"Let our old acquaintance be renewed."---SHAKESPEARE.

"But there is no veil like Light, no adamantine armour against hurt like the Truth."—GEORGE MACDONALD.

THE interview between the blind boy and Ria had been satisfactory beyond Mr. Miles' expectations; and now there was nothing left for the Rector but to go into Wycheater and buy a violin, on which, under Ria's guidance, Walter could scrape to his heart's content.

The great rough boy turned out to be a pale delicate child of twelve, with light silky hair, and large sightless eyes, who seemed to respond at once to the sound of Ria's voice and the touch of her small hand. And when she took her violin,

and played to him, Walter's face became alive with emotion.

"It must be a voice," he said at last; "that must be a voice!"

"Ah! no," Ria said: "I had a voice, but it is gone, gone, and I shall never sing any more, not even when Anton comes home. It is gone," she said gently, laying her hand on Walter's head, "like your sight—and it is a sad loss, not even to be able to sing to my Nina her cradle-song. When I was well, I used to feel as if my voice was like wings to lift me up higher: now I am like a poor bird I saw, Walter—Tiero—I shall call you Tiero—that tried to fly up this morning into that tree by the window: and tried and tried, and then could only chirp on the ground, for its wing was broken. Ah! and my wings are broken."

Then Ria took her violin once more, and it gave a sad pathetic wail, and seemed to tell out the story of the disappointed hope, and unsatisfied longing, to which Walter listened as in a dream.

"But shall I ever play like that?" he asked. "Let me try, ma'am."

"You will not make music quickly," Ria replied. "You must be patient, and try and try; but if the music is in your soul, why, then the violin brings it out, and you will soon find it to be so."

Walter took the instrument in his hand, and Ria posed it for him. Then she gave him the bow, explained about the strings and the fingering, and then the blind boy drew his bow across.

Alas! it was only a discordant scrape; and after a minute or two more of vain effort, his eyes filled with tears.

"I shall never do it," he said.

"Ah, yes, but you will," Ria said, kindling with the enthusiasm of a master in the art. "Do not be vexed, you will do it."

This keen interest was just what Mr. Miles wanted to excite in Ria, and he left mistress and pupil together, little Nina comfortably enjoying herself in a corner, with a great *débris* of toys which her grandmother had bought for her, and which presented a hopeless confusion of headless animals, dishevelled dolls, and a great array of small carts and dolls' perambulators, which were far more attractive to Nina in their mutilated than in their perfect condition.

Mr. Miles had a long list of commissions when he went into Wychester by the early coach. There were books at the Society's Dépôt, coloured prints for the schoolroom and reading-room, medicines and chemicals from the druggist's, mathematical instruments at the optician's; and lastly, there was a visit of inspection to the old book-shop at the corner of the market-place, where Mr. Miles could hardly resist spending more money than he really approved.

Then there was the violin; and the question arose, what did he know about the merits of violins, and could he apply to any one who did know? Bridget Rochemont was at the Bank House, and Mrs. Ambrose Rochemont was the person to

whom to go for help. Why had he not thought of it before? So he turned his steps towards the large old-fashioned spacious house where the banker Rochemonts had made their home for more than a century. The side entrance was a handsome one, with a flight of wide steps and an overhanging cornice of carved wood, which, however, had been painted white, so that the lines in the figure of Justice with her scales were much blurred, and had lost their original effect.

Mr. Miles pulled a bell which gave no uncertain sound. He was admitted into the wide hall, and followed the servant up a noble staircase to a drawing-room on the second-floor.

Here Maude received him with all her wonted sweetness and cordiality. She listened eagerly to his account of the blind boy, and offered to go out with him after luncheon to the best music-shop, to make inquiries for the violin.

"I think I know a good piano when I hear it and touch it, but a violin is different; however, I am sure Weston at the shop is to be depended on, and after all, it will not be necessary to begin with a very good one—a moderate-priced one will answer. Bridget is gone to see an old lady in the Close, but she will be home before you leave, I hope. She has been so useful to me," Maude said, "I do not know how I shall be able to part from her."

"She is useful everywhere, it seems," Mr. Miles said. "East Repton it desolate without her,

and the inhabitants of the Hall and the High Bank House."

Blake came in to luncheon, and Mr. Miles was struck with an improvement in him. He was fuller of life and general interests, and spoke humbly of his little cottage lectures, about which Maude inquired. Ambrose was hearty and cordial to Mr. Miles, and begged him to stay all night, declaring it was shabby of him to come to Wycheater without telling him of his intention; and when Mr. Miles declined staying till the next day, Ambrose proposed driving him to Rendlesham after bank hours, from which place Mr. Miles said he should enjoy the walk homewards.

After luncheon, Maude and Mr. Miles went out on their shopping expedition. They fell in with a bargain in the shape of a violin which had belonged to a gentleman in Wycheater. It was offered for sale at a very moderate price, and had a very sweet mellow tone.

"I will take a stroll down towards the Close, I think," Mr. Miles said, when they had reached the door of the Bank House again.

"Yes, do," Maude responded, "and perhaps you will meet Bridget; she said should be back for afternoon tea. I think very likely she has been to the Cathedral."

Bridget had been more fond this time, than usual, of haunting the Cathedral and the Close, and the places associated with her childhood and early girlhood.

Her brave ardent spirit had been greatly tried

of late; and though she told herself it was her own fault, it did not help her to bear the trouble better.

This strange silence of Bernard's, what did it all mean? He had told her a month's absence at Florence was all that he could spare for his marriage; and now two months had passed by, and he had made no sign to any of the family, much less to her.

To natures like Bridget's, suspense and uncertainty are hard to bear. She would, she thought, be infinitely happier if she could get the first meeting with Bernard's wife over, and settle down into the certainty that an impassable barrier was raised between them.

"And yet," she said to herself as she paced up and down under the trees which skirt Wycheater Close — "and yet I never thought about him in that way; not till I knew that he was lost to me for ever did I know what was in my heart: and I thought it — the pain would go. I thought the worst was over: but it is not over. The story will be Cousin Bridget's over again, perhaps. What nonsense!" she said, rallying herself, "I am as strong as a Welsh pony, father used to say; and yet it was odd, how old Mrs. Turner repeated again and again that I was looking 'sadly,' that expressive adjective used by East-country folk, which amused Maude so much when she first heard it. I think it was the first time in my life any one told me I looked 'sadly.'"

What a lovely winter afternoon it was! How

the deepening twilight brooded over the great Cathedral, and how a pale crimson sky in the west, melting into a faint primrose colour, showed out every corbel on the graceful spire with wonderful distinctness! Venus was in her full glory as an evening star, and was trembling and shimmering through the nearly leafless branches of the lime trees; and a crescent moon, scarcely more than a silver thread was setting its bow in a straight line above the fair queen of all planets.

I do not know that anything, unless it be a great mountain, is more solemnising and tranquillising than the near neighbourhood of one of our old cathedrals in the twilight. Its size seemed to be doubled; its spires and towers to reach the very heavens. On this December evening everything was very quiet. There was only the sound of the distant voices of the boys running home from the Grammar School, mingled with the roll of carts in the streets outside the Close gates. There were but few passers-by; and Bridget took a second turn round the lower Close Square without having met any one.

Lights began twinkle in the windows of the Canons' houses; and in the Deanery drawing-room, the bow-window of which abutted on the Close, Bridget saw a bright lamp on a table and figures passing and re-passing. From the open door of another house a burst of childish laughter rang out in shrill treble, as a troop of merry boys ran in from school, and were greeted by their little sisters.

Memories of her own brothers coming swiftly up the steps of the Bank House, and giving the hall-bell a resonant peal, came over Bridget.

She was the little sister waiting for their return once more; and a dark-haired boy was amongst them whose first thought was always for Bride, and whose best treasure of flowers or books, or books, or whatever interested him most, was always taken to her. She remembered the poetry they had learned together, the recitals of "Marmion" and the "Lady of the Lake;" the admiration with which she had listened to Bernard's impersonation, and the pride she had felt in his own poetical attempts. How secure she had been in the certainty that a long poem in blank verse on the Knights of St. John would make him famous! Alas! the manuscript now lay hid in one of Bridget's drawers in the writing-table at the cottage, and bore the marks of many journeys by post to unappreciative editors of magazines.

In Bridget's eyes, too, never given to take a too favourable view of others, Bernard had been her ideal of all that was loyal and true and chivalrous; and now Ambrose was implying that he had taken undue advantage of his kindness in advancing money for his undertaking, and that his silence was strange, if not inexcusable. There are many bitter moments to pass through for women like Bridget, when they see their ideal vanishing from before their eyes; when they are driven to acknowledge that their pride and faith were

alike ill-placed, that their hero was not what he seemed, and so had failed in the hour of trial.

If Bernard had dealt openly with Bridget; if he had told her of his engagement sooner, and had not pleaded the excuse of want of time for the infrequency of his letters; if, in short, he had treated her as she deserved, with the confidence of friendship, it would not have been so hard to bear the thought. But there had been an insincerity; and want of straightforwardness in his behaviour, which wounded her more than anything; and it was this wound which was slow to heal—this pain which seemed to be ever present, and to take off the edge of all pleasures, and the sweetness out of life.

"I must surely get over it," she was saying to herself. "It will not last all my life. I am only twenty-five; and unless I fall into a consumption, like the first Bridget, I suppose I may live till I am fifty: twice my present age—twenty-five years—an enormous time."

At this point in her meditation she became conscious of a tall figure by her side, and Mr. Miles said:

"I have been looking for you for ten minutes at least. I came to take you back to tea at the Bank, at your sister-in-law's request."

"Oh Mr. Miles, is it you?" Bridget said, waking from her dream. "Have you come with East Repton news? Everybody is well, I hope?"

"Everybody!" he said, catching a tone of anxiety in her voice, "except, indeed, big Bill Brown-

son, and I think the fever has done its work on him. I doubt if he ever gets up again. But my business in Wycheater was to buy a violin for Walter Day, otherwise Gualtiero Giorno. I think the violin lessons promise to be a success."

"That is a good thing; and how is mother? Is she pining away in my absence?"

"I saw her last evening. She is bearing her loss bravely. When is it to be repaired?"

"I am coming home the day after to-morrow. Ambrose is to drive me to East Repton, and stay the night."

"He is kind enough to promise to drive me to Rendlesham this evening, and I shall walk the six miles home, violin-case in hand, like a traveling musician."

"How kind you are to Ria, and to every one," Bridget said involuntarily; "you do something for everybody."

"I thought that was your character," Mr. Miles rejoined; "at least, that is what I have been hearing from Mrs. Rochemont."

"If I do, it is because I like it, or have liked it," Bridget said honestly. "I don't do things because they are right. It would be misery to me to sit by and see everything going wrong, even at Maude's dinner-party, and feel that I could have prevented it. Do you understand now?"

"I understand that you like to give yourself as bad a character as you can."

"You don't think I am saying this for effect,"

Bridget asked sharply, "or for you to say something complimentary in return, do you?"

"No; and you would not get it if you did," he said; "I know better than that. How many times have you been walking round the Square?" Mr. Miles asked, as Bridget turned again, instead of going up the broad central road of the Close.

"I have not counted; but I like to haunt the old place, and to feel how everything is the same, but myself. I did not care half as much for the Cathedral when I lived near it. When one thinks of the generations which it has looked down on with a lofty superiority of steadfastness and unchangeableness, it makes one's own little concerns seem very small, and yet helps to lift one upwards a little, where chance will not come."

"Not change, but variety," Mr. Miles said. "There will be a going from strength to strength, a perpetual learning, and yet the treasure-house inexhaustible: God in all His beauty unfolded to us, and His redeeming love known as we cannot know it here."

"Yes, if only one enters in and does not fall short. You and I are different."

"Why should we be?"

"I don't know; but you stand on a different level altogether. Then you are a clergyman, and your thoughts are naturally directed every day towards religious things."

Mr. Miles stopped, and turning, faced Bridget. "Has it never struck you," he said earnestly, "that familiarity with holy things may rather deaden

than quicken vitality? Do you know it is what I have had to fight hard against since the whole teaching of God's will for me flashed upon me; for the spiritual life must be quickened day by day, or everything, services, sermons preached or heard, become mere form, dry bones, chaff, husks. Don't make the common error of supposing the life of a clergyman must necessarily be nearer to God than the every-day life of every-day people. It is not so; do I not know it is not so?"

Bridget was struck by the fervour with which Mr. Miles spoke, and she said gently:

"I think I understand. Since last summer, when I first knew you, I have tried to read the Bible to myself every day, and study it. I think I have learned most from the words of our Lord Himself, and that they have come out with greater force and freshness than any others. Especially His words in St. Matthew's Gospel, about the blessing that comes to the hungry and thirsty souls, and the rest He promises to the tired ones."

Mr. Miles took Bridget's hand and said, "I do not fear for you, that both the rest and the blessing will be yours. Tell me, is there anything I can do for you, any help I could offer?"

"No," Bridget said, with one of those sudden changes of voice and manner which were so characteristic. "Oh no, I shall get on very well; but do you know we must make haste back to the Bank, or it will be very late before you get home, and Mrs. Bond, to say nothing of Benjamin, will be in despair."

The lights in the drawing-room dazzled Brid-

get's eyes when she went in with Mr. Miles. She did not notice at first that Maude was not alone, and then her heart gave a sudden throb of recognition as a figure advanced towards her, and Bernard Wentworth's voice said:

"You did not expect to see me, Bride?"

Bridget rallied directly.

"No; but I am hardly surprised. You are so erratic in your movements in these times. You know Mr. Miles, Bernard?"

Mr. Miles and Bernard exchanged a somewhat stiff greeting, and Maude began to reproach Mr. Miles for keeping Bridget out so late, and for shortening the time for his six cups of tea: "For you know," she added playfully, "you always drink six cups at East Repton. Ambrose is gone to order the dog-cart round, as he did not wish to be later than five for starting."

Bridget had taken off her hat, and was talking in her quick rapid way about her visit to Mrs. Turner and all her inquiries and remarks. "She asked for every member of the Rochemont family separately, and for every one connected with them. Of course you came in for your share, Bernard, and I told her you were married."

"You told her what was not true, then," said Bernard, coldly. "I am not married, as it happens; it is always better to speak from knowledge."

"How could I speak from knowledge?" Bridget said, replying in a stiff constrained tone. "You never vouchsafed a word to any of your kindred,

and we cannot divine things. Have you been ill?" she asked, looking earnestly at him.

"Yes, I have been ill; but," as Mr. Miles came up to say good-bye, "this is not the place to tell a long story, even if you wish to hear it."

"Good-bye," Mr. Miles said, "but only till the day after to-morrow, I hope. We cannot spare Miss Rochemont any longer, you know," he continued, turning to Maude. "There are at least a dozen things waiting for her to do when she returns."

"Don't be too sure I shall do them," Bridget said, laughing. "I may have learned how pleasant idleness is, here, you know."

Bernard's brow had been growing ominously dark, and there was a shrug of his shoulder, as Mr. Miles, with a somewhat prolonged grasp of Bride's hand, answered:

"That is a lesson you could never learn. Good-bye."

"You seem on very intimate terms with your Vicar, now," Bernard said. "He is not a man I should have thought you could take to. He has assurance enough, anyhow."

"He is a great friend of mine," Bridget said; "and nothing can exceed his self-denying work in our poor neglected village."

"Oh! I dare say he thought you were all benighted, till he came with his light to show you what to do. Intolerably conceited people always think they have a mission to the ignorant. Fancy

Mr. Miles teaching Madame and you; it is good, I must say."

Maude now returned from seeing her husband and guest off from the wide corridor above the hall, and was followed by Blake, and Bridget took the opportunity of escaping to her room till dinner. Two hours later, just before the second bell rang, Maude tapped at Bridget's door.

"This is very strange about Mr. Wentworth, Bride. He walked into Ambrose's room in the Bank this afternoon, and simply said, that he was sorry he had not been able to see him before on business matters. You know Ambrose lent him money."

"Advanced him money on security, you mean," Bridget said, with the precision of one who had known bankers' phrases.

"Well, yes; and this business in Somersetshire has been a great expense to start, and there is no profit yet. Then there is some mystery about the engagement. Anyhow, it is broken off. Mr. Wentworth was very ill at Florence, it seems, and was only able to travel a few days ago. Still, he ought to have written to Ambrose."

"Certainly," Bridget answered; "and until I saw a letter from Madame to Mr. Miles, a few days ago, no one had heard anything of him."

"He looks very ill and very unhappy," Maude said. "I cannot help feeling sorry for him. You ran away when Blake came in, Bridget; he is so happy, poor fellow, for the Squire seems relenting; and Madame Rochemont wrote to him to say, that

if he thought it worth while to come out to Florence, he would be welcome."

"That implies that his engagement with Claire is sanctioned, I suppose," Bridget said; but she spoke absently, and as if her thoughts were far away.

Then, putting her arm in her sister-in-law's, they went down the wide staircase to dinner.

Ambrose was in good spirits; and his handsome face, with its bright colour after the drive to Rendlesham, was a great contrast to Blake's ethereal countenance and Bernard's somewhat sallow complexion. When Maude and Bridget went into the drawing-room, Blake followed, and left Ambrose and Bernard together.

"Are you coming to-night to the service in the school-room, Maude?" Blake inquired.

Maude hesitated.

"I think not to-night; dinner was so late, and I think I had better not come. Are you going to preach?"

"I am going to speak to the men from the crape factory," Blake said. "Mr. Townsend is ill. I must be off, for it is late. Will you come, Bride?"

To Blake's astonishment, Bridget said, "Yes; wait one moment while I get ready, I will be very quick." She sprang upstairs, and returned to find Blake waiting in his overcoat in the hall, ready to start. Bridget put her hand in her brother's arm, and said, "I am glad you are happier about Claire, Blake."

"Thank you, Bride; you are very good to me. I do feel happier, for I do not think I could have urged her to be my wife against her father's consent. Still, I am not going out to Florence. I wish to devote myself entirely to reading and preparation for my ordination next summer. Then I trust Claire will be home at Easter, and I shall see her at the Hall."

"Do not work too hard, Blake," Bridget said; "mother is always prophesying you will break down."

"She need not be afraid. I am much stronger than in my first Cambridge year: stronger and so much happier; for, Bride, there is no happiness like that which comes from feeling peace is made with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what I am going to speak to the men about to-night."

As he spoke, they turned down a narrow lane leading to the square ugly building which was used as a schoolroom by the Vicar of the parish with whom Blake was reading.

The forms were all filled with working men and a sprinkling of women when Blake and his sister entered. Bride sat down on a seat near the door, while her brother went up to the top of the room, and took up his position at the schoolmaster's desk. Bowing his head in his hands, he prayed earnestly for a few moments. Then he gave out a hymn, reading every verse before it was sung in a clear voice. The hymn,

'Jesus, Refuge of my soul,'

had been familiar to Bride from her childhood. It was now full of memories of the days when she used to sing it with Madame, and liked the simple rhythm of the tune and cadence of the words, with no real thought of their meaning. When the hymn was sung, Blake knelt down and prayed. So earnest and so full of soul were his words, that Bridget could have thought they were his own and spoken in that particular order for the first time. But the collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter, as it fell from her brother's lips, had a strange significance for her; and the "sundry and manifold changes of this mortal life," seemed presented in striking contrast with the true joys which shall continue and abide. A few more words followed; prayer for the Presence of the Spirit there in that little homely room, as in the upper chamber at Jerusalem long before. And then Blake rose to speak.

"The Peace of God!" were the words of his text, and he entreated his hearers to come for this Great Gift, freely offered—freely given—without money and without price.

The dark-complexioned, thin-faced weavers, some with their black aprons twisted round their waists, some with threadbare ragged coats, listened for the most part, with eager attention. One man near Bride settled himself into an attitude of profound interest; and as Blake spoke, Bride saw that the thin lips were quivering. Very slowly large tears made a path for themselves down the poor weaver's grimy cheeks, and were from time

to time stealthily brushed with the back of his lean hand. For times were bad with the crape-weavers of Wychester, and wages were at a low ebb. Hunger and want were at the door this winter, and discontent and bitter complaints were rife. Low fever, of the same type as that which hung about Money's Corner at East Repton, prevailed in the low parts of the city, and the man whose tears touched Bridget so greatly had just been left a widower with a group of helpless children, motherless.

"O Lamb of God, grant us Thy Peace," were the concluding words of Blake's address, and there were many fervent "Amens" from the listeners.

One, uttered close to Bridget, made her look round, and she then knew for the first time that Bernard was standing behind her. What a striking contrast he was to the wan, deeply-furrowed faces of the men near him.

Standing erect and still, his clearly-cut features might have been carved out of marble—so motionless he was, with his arms folded on his breast, and his eyes looking out upon the scene before him, with a wistful earnestness. Peace seemed far from Bernard Wentworth that night, and his proud spirit in the day of its humiliation responded to Blake's prayer, as earnestly as the weary way-worn man on whose grimy hand Bridget laid hers, with a sudden impulse of sympathy.

"He be a rare one, do you know him?" the man asked of Bride.

"Yes, I know him; he is my brother. Can he help you or comfort you? Tell me your name, and I know he will come and see you."

The man groaned.

"No, no; I don't want to trouble nobody."

"It's no trouble—tell me your name."

"Enoch Grey, and, and I live in the story of No. 6, Mansel Street; but he'd better not come, for the fever is raging down our way. I've buried my wife, and I expect my Sarah Jane will go next. She is my eldest girl, bless her!" Then, with a "Good-night, miss," the poor man turned away, his high-shouldered bent figure passing by Bernard as he went out.

Blake was speaking to two or three at the top of the room, and Bernard seized the opportunity he sought.

"I want to talk to you, Bridget, May I walk home with you? I am leaving early to-morrow—unless, indeed, you do not care to be bothered with my concerns, which is more than likely."

Bridget answered at once, and decidedly: "I am always interested in your concerns. What is wrong?"

"I have had a most humiliating lesson. I have been deceived by—by a pretty face, and a false manner. I went out to Florence, as you know, to be married—married, forsooth!—it was what is commonly called a wild-goose chase. Perhaps you are glad to hear it," he said bitterly, "and think that I have only had my deserts."

Bridget's reply was quite calm, and no one

would have suspected that at her heart a pain had been lying for many months, which Bernard had caused.

"It is very hard to be deceived and mistaken in any one whom we love," she said. "How was it?"

"It seems she had been carrying on a double game all the time. When I got to Florence I found Lady Montserat mysterious, and anxious at any cost to hurry on the marriage. Two days afterwards Ida went off with one of the sons, a good-for-nothing scapegrace who has been the plague of his mother's life. He has nothing but debts in the world, and a nice life lies before her, poor child!"

The tone softened a little now, and Bridget said, "You must try to forgive her; no doubt she will reap what she has sown, as we all do more or less."

"It is hard to be made a fool of," Bernard said. "I am only too thankful to hide my head down in Somersetshire, and keep the accounts of the silk mill. Ambrose has been in a very unnecessary state of alarm about the money. That's all right, and the silk is likely to prosper. So now I must vanish amidst its folds, I suppose, and be seen no more."

"I cannot think why you did not write to some of us, and tell us what had happened."

"I could not. It was bad enough to bear, without being cackled over by all one's relations. I was ill, too; had what they called a feverish

attack; and I had only been outside the hotel once when I called on Madame. I was off the next day."

"Did she—Ida, I mean—say anything in self-defence?"

"She wrote me a long story of how she had never loved me; it was only gratitude and desire to get away from Lady Montserat that made her consent; and a heap more rubbish about this wretched fellow Maneston. I really can't tell you any more, and I ask you again not to make all this public."

"As if I should!" Bridget exclaimed. "You may trust me."

"Blake is very eloquent," Bernard said suddenly; "I did not think he could have such power as he showed to-night. He is practising on these poor people, I suppose."

"These schoolroom meetings reach many that would not come to church. Did you notice the man who was next me?"

"Yes, and your token of sympathy. I wish you would give me the like."

They were at the steps of the Bank House, and Bridget put out her hand:

"I am very sorry for you, Bernard, and I hope you and I may learn to know what the Peace is, of which poor Blake spoke."

"Poor Blake! I begin to think that adjective misplaced. I would give something to stand in his shoes, after all. He may be tiresome in pri-

vate life, but he is wonderful when talking to poor men."

"Yes, reality always tells at last," Bridget said, "in a world where sometimes one is inclined to think nothing is real or true." She had taken her hand from Bernard's now, and stood waiting for him to ring the bell.

"Wait one minute, Bride; I shall not see you again. I have awoke from a dream; and though it has been a rude wakening, I do not know that I am sorry. She was so beautiful, and had such caressing little ways, and talked so much of her desolation and her homelessness—how could I think she was altogether a shadow? So it was; and it has passed now. Some day—not yet—but some day, will you show me what reality means?"

Bridget's voice became hard and unsympathetic as she said, "You must find some one else to do that; please ring the bell, for I am cold;" and in another minute they had parted.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROUGH PLACES.

'He heeded not reviling tones,
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,
Though cursed and scorn'd and bruised with stones.

'He seems to hear a Heavenly Friend,
And through thick veils to apprehend—
A labourer working to an end.'

TENNYSON.

WHEN Ambrose set Mr. Miles down on the road

just outside the town of Rendlesham, he was so laden with parcels, that he said, with his satchel thrown over his shoulder, stuffed full of purchases, and the violin-case in his hand, he would be taken for a pedlar.

"I wonder you did not send your goods and chattels by the coach or the carrier," Ambrose said.

"Thanks, no. I am always my own carrier. Good-night."

"I think I ought to drive you to East Repton," Ambrose continued.

"No, thanks; you certainly ought not. Good night."

Ambrose turned his horse's head again towards Wychester, and Mr. Miles pursued his way.

It was a bright winter's evening, and the hosts of heaven were in full glory, throbbing with intense brilliancy in the dark blue sky, from which Venus had vanished an hour or more. The walk was pure pleasure to Mr. Miles. He strode along regardless of mud and mire and of the weight he carried, and the six miles did not seem as long to him as the eight had done on the top of Ambrose Rochemont's dog-cart. Only a mile of heath and moorland lay between Mr. Miles and East Repton, before he was thinking of the way at all, or the distance he had come.

As he crossed the heath, following the straight line of coach-road, he saw to the right a tall figure close to him. Presently a footstep drew

near, and a man was at the Vicar's side. He did not speak, and it was Mr. Miles who said:

"Are you going to Rollestone or Repton? If so, we may as well bear each other company."

"Yes, I be going to East Repton," was the gruff reply; "and I'm a-going to walk with you—that's more."

"All right", Mr. Miles replied, "I am bound for East Repton also."

"Yes, I know you be. You are the parson, I believe, who is turning the place topsy-turvy with yer humbug and stuff. I am no friend of yours, 'bor.' "*"

"I am sorry for that," Mr. Miles said coolly; "how have I offended you?"

"How? Why, by all your canting nonsense and fuss about air, and all the rest of it—pulling down poor bodies' homes about their ears, and setting Squire Rochemont on us, and his keepers too. You be a meddling old hypocrite, that's my opinion."

"Well," Mr. Miles said quietly, "you are not over-civil, but I know how a man feels when he fancies he is injured. Tell me what your grievance is."

"My grievance — yes, I'll just tell you my grievance. You be going to pull down my house and leave me without a roof to cover me."

"My good fellow, that is a mistake. I suppose you live in that tumble-down place next

* East Country abbreviation for '*neighbour*,' often used by the lower class.

Brownson's. The fever is having its own way there, in Money's Corner, and I want to have my way instead. Your little place is the worst in Money's Corner, and I agree with the Squire's bailiff that it is better to pull it down. Of course, another dwelling will be provided for you, and you will be a great deal better off in the end."

"Tell ye what," said the man fiercely, "I shan't budge, and so you needn't look for it." A long string of opprobrious epithets and coarse language followed, and Mr. Miles quickened his pace to get beyond the torrent of dreadful oaths which he found himself unable to stem.

"It's no use your stumping off, I say; but you'll stump out, now. It may answer your purpose. Come now, give us what's in your pocket, and I'll consider what I can do. Now, do you hear?"

"Do you think, my man, that I am going to give you money? If you do, you are indeed mistaken. The hovel in which you live, with its open drain and crowded room, will surely invite the fever which has brought Bill Brownson to the gates of death to lay its hand on you, and your children, and your poor wife. I have determined to do my best to clear away the rubbish in Money's Corner, and open it out for the breath of God's free air and light, which are His gifts to the poor man as well as to the rich."

"You have, have ye? well then, you'll live to repent it," the man said fiercely. "You ain't a-going to ride it over me nor mine; and so I tell

you. You mind, you'll repent it if ever a stick of my place is touched."

Mr. Miles guessed, and truly, that drink had inflamed the man's grievance, and that many words would he wasted.

"I shall do all I can for you, and I pray God to show me how to do it in the right way. I must bid you good-night here."

Mr. Miles was tired, and was turning down the lane leading to the Vicarage, when a woman came up to him, saying—

"If you be the parson, I wish you'd come round to Money's Corner, for Bill Brownson has been a-worrying for you all this day. He can't last long, and he is that frantic to see you we have not known what to do with him."

Without a thought of fatigue or of anything but his work and his Master's cause, the Vicar turned at once, and said:

"You are not one of my own people, are you?"

"No," she said; "I live down Rollestone way. I was to have been Bill's wife, once; but he took to wild ways, and then I would not have him. Now I am sorry, that I am," and the voice of the speaker suddenly failed, and Mr. Miles knew that tears had choked it.

The people in Money's Corner were looked upon with suspicion by the rest of the East Repton inhabitants, and the group of cottages was rather disowned by the people of the village; for "to belong to them folk down Money's way" was

sufficient to prevent a labourer from getting employment on one of the farms, or a girl a place as general helper indoors. Madame's gentle persuasive powers had been tried from time to time in Money's Corner, but the Squire did not like her to go amongst "that rough set," as she went amongst the people of the village itself; and though Money's Corner was as much a part of the Rochemont estate as the rest, those hovels had increased of late years, and with the bailiff as well as Mr. Rochemont, it was out of sight out of mind, with the houses and people. Money's Corner took its name from the tradition that a large sum of money had been found in the hollow where the ground had been turned up for one of the houses some fifty years before; and tradition also told, that the man who had secreted it there, did it to avoid discovery, he having robbed, and nearly done to death, a member of the Rochemont family on his way to the Bank at Wychester, in the early part of this century. Mr. Miles knew nothing of fear, but it struck him that the heavy footsteps following him and the woman up the narrow lane were those of the man who had joined him on the common, and that he was not the most desirable companion for a dark walk home from Money's Corner.

All other thoughts were, however, soon lost except the one which centred in the once stalwart man lying on his low straw bed, with large hungry eyes fixed earnestly on the Vicar, and with his long thin hands clutching nervously at the coarse

covering which was thrown over him. Bill Brownson was so weak that he could scarcely articulate, and when Mr. Miles and his guide entered the low close room, it was difficult to catch what he said. The woman, whom Mr. Miles saw by the light of the tallow candle fixed in a broken bottle to be respectable in appearance though very poor, went up to the sick man and put her ear close to his mouth.

"He wants you to pray to the Lord for him," she said; "he says he is so afraid to die."

The Vicar knelt down at once and prayed in short, simple words, and then did his best to alleviate the man's bodily suffering. He raised him with his strong arms, he bathed his burning forehead with vinegar and water, and inquired when the doctor had last seen him.

"This morning. He says physic is no use now," the woman said with a sob. "His poor mother is worn out, and so I'll stay with him to-night."

"That is right," Mr. Miles said; "and send a boy down to the Vicarage. I will see that some cooling drink is sent, and some other things; and keep the window open, and mind there is a free current of air through the place. I suppose the others sleep below stairs now?"

"Yes, sir. You are very kind, I am sure."

Mr. Miles took her hand in a kindly grasp, and then bent over Bill at parting: "Good-night, Bill."

"Oh, sir, I'd be a different man if only I might live!"

"It is in God's hands, my poor fellow; not a hair of our heads falls without His knowledge."

"But I've been such a bad 'un," Bill groaned.

"Yes," said Mr. Miles firmly, "it is true, too true; but, Bill, Christ came to save the bad ones, and die for them. He could not have done more. Think of it, Bill; believe it; and if you are sorry for the the past, He will take care of the future."

"I think I am sorry," Bill gasped. "I'd like to be good, I would."

"God bless you!" the Vicar said, turning sadly away, as he thought of the strong manhood laid low, and of the wasted life and energies of that soul for which the beautiful story of Divine sacrifice and love seemed to be told in vain.

"You are late, sir," was Mrs. Bond's greeting, as at last he found himself at home. "You are late, sir, and very tired, I am sure."

"Have there been any messages for me to-day?"

Mrs. Bond hesitated. "Nothing very pressing, sir. Those people from Money's Corner have been sending. They are regular beggars. I sent the beef-tea, and told them not to come any more. I believe that man Brownson is dying."

"I have seen him on my way home," said Mr. Miles, "and a boy will be here directly to take back something for him. Never tell me again that there has been no pressing message, when a dying man wants to see me, Mrs. Bond."

"Well, sir, I do think you wear yourself out in this place for a set of ungrateful people, and I can't bear to see it—and that's the truth!"

Mr. Miles smiled his rare sweet smile on the good housekeeper.

"I am not worn out yet. Let me have my dinner, and you will see what a good appetite I have, to convince you that I am all right."

The Vicar made his promise good to Mrs. Bond, and then stretched himself out by the blazing fire, his reading table and lamp by his side, and his paper waiting to be read. But he folded his hands at the back of his head and sat idle for some time.

When Mrs. Bond brought his steaming cup of coffee, and stirred the fire and lingered for a little talk, the Vicar made no sign of moving or speaking, and the house-keeper departed, saying to Ben:

"He is tired, though he won't own it. Dear me! when a man gets near fifty, he can't go on as he did at twenty."

This was rather a soliloquy than an opinion expressed to Ben, who was seated at a table, scrawling some blotted characters in a book, which he called "writing his copy." Ben was sharper witted than Tom at the Cottage, and Mrs. Bond filled up spare moments of an evening by superintending his education. Suddenly the squeaking pen ceased, and Ben looked up with a large smudge of ink across his cheek.

"As we get on in years we can't expect to

slave and work as we did when we were young," Mrs. Bond remarked.

"My mother says——" Ben began, and then stopped.

"That she feels the burden of her years, poor soul? I dare say she does, with a lot of troublesome children, and her husband next to no good to her."

"Mother says," Ben began again, "that the master will be married before the year is out, to Miss Rochemont."

"How dare you talk of ladies' and gentlemen's concerns like that?" Mrs. Bond said wrathfully. "I am ashamed of your mother's impudence and so you may tell her."

Ben toiled over his blots and long-tailed g's again; but he murmured under his breath:

"'Tisn't only mother, but Mr. Hickes says just the same;" and then a grin at Mrs. Bond's discomfiture widened Ben's wide mouth almost from ear to ear.

Mr. Miles was all unconscious of the remarks made on him and his prospects in the house-keeper's room that night. Had the village gossips known where his thoughts were concentrated, as he looked dreamily into the fire, with papers, letters, unheeded by his side, they would have been satisfied that their surmises and prophecies were not so baseless and unlikely to be fulfilled as Mrs. Bond believed. Men of Mr. Miles' age, who have lived for years, the best years of their manhood, in college rooms, are sometimes more quickly taken

by feminine society and attractions than those who have gone up and down in the world for a long time. Mr. Miles may have had his boyish love, like most men, but a deep serious attachment he had never felt for any woman. Bridget Rochemont, in her frank outspoken sincerity, her true and fearless nature, had interested him from the first, and little by little he grew from interest to admiration; and since the evening of their conversation in the little library at the Cottage these had become deeper, till he could not hide from himself that he loved her with the full strength of his manhood.

Whether she could love him, was daily becoming a question he longed to ask; and yet he feared to break up the pleasant friendliness of their present intercourse by seeking an assurance that she would, perhaps, refuse to give. If she did refuse it, then a great barrier would rise up between them; for he knew that the tie of friendship between man and woman, when an unsuccessful attempt is made to change it into love, can never be re-united.

Mr. Miles was not the man to allow anything to interfere with his daily routine and duty. Rather this tender love growing up in his heart for Bridget was as a flower which shed a sweetness over his work without weakening his efforts, a stimulus to exertion, and a bracing element in his life. He saw that Bridget's feelings, when once quickened, were strong, and that she would be steadfast if once she surrendered herself. Then came the

question—would she so surrender herself to him as Claire had done to Blake, as true-hearted women did surrender themselves every day to men who were often but little worthy of trust? Ah! if she did—he dared not dwell on the bright picture of home joys which presented itself. Sympathy, for which we all crave instinctively, in his work and in his pursuits: the delight of initiating her into all the manifold glories of creation, in which he saw the hand of One who loved him, and to whom he longed to lead her: all this looked fair and tempting to the man, who for many years had lived without the nearer ties of life. His mother had been the guiding-star of his boyhood; and the bitterest sorrow he had ever known was her loss, when yet a boy at school. The slow communication of those days only brought him the news of her illness in time for him to reach her when hardly able to articulate his name. Her memory occupied the most sacred niche in the inner temple of his heart, where we all keep our Penates, and made him especially tender to all mothers, and chivalrous to all women for her sake. Blessed and happy are those mothers who thus leave a life-long mark for good upon their sons: and how thrice blessed are the sons who have these mothers to remember as the embodiment, to them, of all that makes a woman dear and beautiful—a woman amongst women.

Bridget returned to the Cottage at the end of the week. She found Ria and her pupil had made a strong alliance already, and the interest

increased every day. The quick sensitive ear of the violin, and squeaks and groans—the torture of the early days of violin-playing—were few.

To little Nina and her mother the blind Walter became a perpetual source of delight: the feverish anxiety for her husband's letters became less, and Ria was better and happier than she had been for many weeks.

Christmas came, with all the requirements of parish and neighbourhood, and Bridget was wanted on all sides. Madame entrusted her with all her gifts to dispense in her absence, and also with the management of the dinner to the old people, and the tea and games for the young ones of the village. Mr. Miles found himself constantly referring to her, and consulting; and Mrs. Rochemont might well say, with an air of dissatisfaction, that there was a limit to everything, and that Bride was foolish to allow herself to be so overworked.

"It is the old story of the willing horse, mother," Bridget said one day, when she was starting for the schoolroom with a large basket of toys and other things, labelled and numbered for the Christmas-tree—then a greater novelty than now.

"Let Tom or HICKES carry that basket, Bride."

"No, thanks, mother," Bridget said; "wind and weather permitting, I would rather carry it for myself."

"Bride," her mother said as she was leaving the room, "is it not rather strange that we have not heard again from Anthony?"

"I am not surprised," Bridget said quietly. "I always expected this grand appointment to end in moonshine."

"It is very trying; and really, though I am glad to have Ria well employed, her teaching the blind boy music has reached the ears of the Parkers and Dacres, and I expect the neighbourhood generally says strange things of us."

Poor Mrs. Rochemont stood somewhat in dread of the comments of the "neighbourhood," and disliked to feel her concerns were made the subject of conversation. She forgot, as we are all so apt to forget, that it is, with very few exceptions, a matter of give and take in this matter. But, to do her justice, she was by nature too indolent to trouble herself very much about her neighbours' business, and certainly never took pains to trace out any report, whether of birth, death, or marriage.

Bridget had scarcely been gone five minutes when the wife of the clergyman of a neighbouring parish drove up in her pony-carriage, to pay Mrs. Rochemont a visit.

"I met your daughter just as I was turning in at the gate," Mrs. Dacre said. "She was heavily laden with Christmas presents, on her way to the school. She looks very well."

"Yes, Bridget is perfectly well," Mrs. Rochemont replied. "It is a great mercy to have strong health—a blessing we can only appreciate when it is denied us."

"You are looking as blooming as your daughter

Mrs. Dacre went on. "And have you good news of your absent ones? When does your son take Orders? I suppose the marriage will come off in the course of next year?"

"I hope so," was all Mrs. Rochemont had time to rejoin; for Mrs. Dacre—ever glad of a talk—was not to be interrupted. It was like the continuous stream of a swiftly-running brook; and, shallow and unimportant, it contrived to make itself heard and heeded.

"The Squire found it necessary to retrench, I believe, and so the Hall is shut up. *So* melancholy it looked as I drove past, I could hardly bear to see it. Well, five daughters are a sufficiently heavy burden, all things considered. I dare say Mr. Rochemont will not object to part with one, and to such an excellent young man as your son Blake too!"

Mrs. Rochemont did not altogether like to hear Blake called an "excellent young man" by Mrs. Dacre, but she did not make any rejoinder. Then her irrepressible visitor, after the fashion of her type of women of to-day or yesterday, fifteen, twenty, or fifty years ago, proceeded to discuss other matters, winding up with a strong protest against a clergyman like Mr. Miles putting absurd notions into simple village people's heads, and really doing things which Mrs. Dacre considered most extraordinary.

There was a certain dignity which the clergyman of a country place ought to be very careful to maintain, and Mrs. Dacre did not think it

"looked well," as she expressed it, to see Mr. Miles, with a dredging net in his hand, coming up from the shore, in confidential conversation with one of those rough seafaring men, who really were quite uncivilised in their ways, and were much happier left to themselves. "Mr. Miles is painfully eccentric. There is a sort of affectation in a man, belonging, as he does, to a very good family, setting all social laws at defiance. Did you hear of his rushing off from a dinner not long ago at Felton Park, in the very middle of dinner, to see a man whose leg was crushed in a saw-mill, and scarcely apologising?"

Yes, Mrs. Rochemont had heard of it, for Bridget had been dining at Felton Park that same evening. "But really," said Mrs. Rochemont, rising a little on the defensive, "I find Mr. Miles a most pleasant neighbour and friend, and he is very kind and considerate to me."

Mrs. Dacre was about to rejoin, when the door opened, and little Nina appeared, in the full glory of a rose-coloured Cashmere which her mother had just made for her, and which set off her pure Rochemont style of beauty to the utmost.

Proud as Mrs. Rochemont always was of Nina, she would have liked better that she should have escaped Mrs. Dacre's eye. Of course, admiration for the child ended in inquiries for the mother, and led to the story of the advertisement in the Rollestone shop—now, Mrs. Rochemont hoped, quite forgotten.

At last the visit was over. Mrs. Rochemont leaned back in her chair, quite exhausted with what she had gone through. Not heeding little Nina's entreaties to "play music on the piano," the child found some other amusement, and, seating herself on the carpet, played havoc instead with the lower row of books on a set of shelves in a recess in the room. When Katherine came at last to take her pet away to bed, she exclaimed that she had done, at least, a pound's worth of mischief. "But then," Katherine went on, "children must have some one to notice them; it never answers to leave them to themselves, though it is very easy to do that. What with violin scrape-scraping, and blind boys, and nonsense, it seems to me, the child might turn the house inside out before any one would care." Katherine spoke with the freedom of an old servant, to which her mistress was well accustomed.

"Take her away, Katherine," Mrs. Rochemont said. "I am so tired, and I do hope the coffee will be well made. Bring me a cup as soon as possible."

"That will depend, ma'am, upon the fire. We are half smothered with smoke in the kitchen, for the wind is blowing a fearful hurricane from the east, and when it does that, as you know, the chimney is enough to try the patience of a saint. It will be an awful night at sea, and Hickes says the waves are running mountains high already."

"Well, there is the fire in the housekeeper's

room; surely you can boil water there; anyhow, I must have my coffee."

The wind and waves might roar, and the kitchen be filled with smoke, but Katherine knew her mistress must have her cup of coffee at the right moment, with its due allowance of hot milk, and a spoonful of rich cream. It is astonishing how people like Mrs. Rochemont do contrive to get what they want, and how complacently every one yields to them. The coffee came at the time appointed, the fire was replenished with another log of wood, and Mrs. Rochemont resigned herself to repose in the gathering twilight. She was roused at last by a sudden gust of wind, which came up the valley from the sea in an angry burst, bowing the trees landward in its fury, and dying away at last with a sullen moan, as it shook the outbulding where Ria sat, till it seemed to her to rock like a cradle.

"You cannot go home in a storm like this, Tiero," she said; "your father will not come for you."

"Oh yes, he will. Mother would be so frightened if I did not go home. May I try that tune once more, ma'am?"

"Yes, as often as you like. No! you have not the *a* sharp, that is flat; ah! yes, that is right. It is wonderful; only six weeks, and you can play what many could not play at two years' end."

"It is all your kindness, all your goodness,

said Tiero; "and I always feel that I can't thank God enough for sending you to me."

"Is it so?" Ria said dreamily. "Then poor Anton's little wife is a comfort to somebody after all. Listen how the wind is blowing—raging—tearing; then how it sinks and falls, and then is quiet. So with me; when I came here first I felt so!—listen!" and Ria took her violin and played. The blind boy leaned forward in an attitude of profound attention, with the true instinct of a musical soul interpreting, as the strain went on, and saying in a low voice, "Beautiful—now you are glad—now it is rest."

With the last note of rest and peace, little Nina rushed in, saying:

"*Madre mia, mia*, there is such a big wind. I don't lik it."

"Come to me then, my dove. See, mother can take thee on her knee—she always has room for Nina—and thou shalt hear Tiero play."

"I don't want to hear Tiero, I want to be quiet," said Nina, hiding her head on her mother's shoulder. "There! That's a gun again. Hicky said there were guns." And indeed, through the roar and whirl of the storm, there was distinctly heard the report of a gun.

Mr. Miles and Bridget were just leaving the school-house, when a man coming up the village, said:

"There's a schooner in distress, sir, down below. She was caught by the gale on her way

to Yarmouth harbour, and she's driving in as hard as she can."

"Have they sent to Rolleston for the life-boat?" Mr. Miles asked; "if not, let them do so at once. I will go down to the shore and see what can be done."

"I think one of the coastguard has just gone to Rolleston; but I'll go myself, if your honour likes."

"There's a good fellow, and lose no time. Now I must bid you good-bye," Mr. Miles said, turning to Bridget "and go down to the beach as quickly as possible."

"May I not come with you?" she asked.

"It is getting dark, and very cold," he answered. "Do you think you ought to come?"

"If I am of no use I will not stay; but I remember, long ago, when a ship was wrecked, going down with my father to the beach, and I was of some help."

"I don't doubt the help you could give," Mr. Miles said; "I was only fearing whether you could stand against the wind down there—we shall find it pretty strong when we face the sea."

"We must go through the Cottage grounds, it is the shortest way," Bridget said; "and I will leave a message at the door that I am all right, for fear my mother should be anxious."

This was done, and then Mr. Miles and Bridget pursued their way; Bride's little, active, lithe figure making more real head against the wind than her companion's.

Suddenly she looked round, and in the gathering twilight saw a man was following them.

"Some one is coming behind us," she said.

"I dare say one of my friends from Money's Corner. Not very creditable tales are told of their eagerness to prowl about wrecks, and lay their hands on what comes first."

"I know; I have heard about it," Bridget said. Then she tripped lightly down the steep muddy path before Mr. Miles, and battled against the furious blasts, laughing as once or twice her hat was blown back and the glossy braids of hair, generally so tightly coiled round her head, were flying like streamers in the wind.

When within a quarter of a mile from the beach, a turn in the lane brought them within sight of the leaden-coloured seething ocean, gloomy and dark in the dim light, and flecked with foam of ghastly whiteness.

The distressed ship, with bowed masts, was not half a mile from the shore. She was evidently driving on to the sands, unable to resist the mountainous billows, which were playing with her as with a toy.

"I never saw the sea rougher," Bridget said, standing still for a moment. "Oh, that poor ship! I wonder how many people are on board—I hope no women and children."

She turned to look for her companion as she spoke, and to her surprise found he was not following her. The lane was narrow—where the primroses in spring were a miracle of loveliness

—with high banks on either side, which made it still more difficult to discern anything clearly, and Bridget looked in vain for the tall figure she expected to see. The wind was now roaring so furiously that it prevented her from hearing even her own voice as she called her companion by name.

Then she retraced her steps, and to her horror stumbled against a prostrate figure. Stooping down, she saw it was the Vicar.

“What has happened?” she asked; “are you hurt? Pray speak to me.”

There was no answer, and Bridget knelt and looked anxiously into Mr. Miles’ face. She could just see that the face turned up before her was pale and rigid, and that Mr. Miles was insensible. Bridget’s presence of mind and prompt determination did not fail her now. She loosened the Vicar’s collar, and raised his head gently as she knelt by him. No help was near, the darkness gathered apace, and the booming of the waves and roaring of the wind made so much noise that she was almost deafened; but she put her ear to Mr. Miles’s lips, and to her great relief heard a sigh, and then some inarticulate words. Presently he sat up, and passing his hand over his forehead, said:

“Yes, I remember now; that fellow knocked me down with one blow, because I turned and spoke to him about the horrid practice of robbing shipwrecked people. I am all right now,”

he said, almost in his natural voice; "we must get down to the beach as quickly as possible."

"Are you hurt?" Bridget asked. "You must come home."

"I must *not* come home. I must get to the beach as soon as I can. Now, will you help me?"

Bridget put out both her hands, and Mr. Miles took them and stood erect.

"You are very good to me," he said.

"But not much help, I am afraid," she replied. "Indeed, I think you must not come down to the beach."

"That fellow is angry with me because I have tried to clear out Money's Corner in the first place, and because I guess well enough what his errand is below there, in the second. The blow caught the back of my head, and might have been dangerous. As it is, I am only a little shaky, as you may see, and rather weak and dizzy, but I shall soon come round. Now, then."

"Put your hand on my shoulder," Bridget said, "I am just the right height for your walking-stick, you know."

The Vicar did as she asked him, and then, stopping and bending down, he said:

"How am I to thank you! Not one woman in a hundred would have acted with such courage, but would have screamed and left me to myself. The great mercy for which I thank God, is, that the man did not touch you. It might have been otherwise, while I was lying there helpless."

"I am afraid you are more hurt than you wish me to think," Bridget said; for Mr. Miles' voice, generally so firm and decided, faltered, and she felt the hand on her shoulder tremble. "Perhaps that man is lurking about now," she went on. "Will it not be wiser to return?"

"Not for me," Mr. Miles said. "I feel I ought to go on—if you are not afraid, and feel as I do, that God is with us."

Bridget said no more, and they began their progress to the beach.

Here there was a group gathered round some burning wood and sea-weed, which had been hastily scraped together and lighted as a beacon for the ship.

"How many men are here?" Mr. Miles said. "We must all look alive if the ship goes to pieces before the life-boat comes from Rolleston."

"She'll strike in another five minutes," was the remark of one man; "and the coastguard are all at Hurlingham Bay, for there's work for them at Hurlingham."

"There will be work for us here. Have you any ropes? She will drive within reach before she splits up, I think," Mr. Miles said.

"Ropes, and who is to go into the surf? It would choke a chap in less time than one could say Jack Robinson."

"Heap up the fire," Mr. Miles said, in the tone of a leader: "we shall see what we are doing then; by no means let it burn low. Now, who are here? Jacob Stoke, is that you, and that Jack

Simpson, and Jim Brownson, and *you*——?” the Vicar continued, going up to a huge figure casting a long shadow from the flame’s fitful blaze.

“Now, let us ask God’s help in this storm, that we may save the lives of those poor souls out yonder!” And then in a resonant voice, with uncovered head, Mr. Miles stood, and through the raging of the wind and sea he was heard to ask God for courage and determination to save the lives of the crew of the ship, now hurrying on to meet her doom.

Bridget did not wonder when a gruff voice near her said, “He is a fine man, the Parson;” for in the lurid light of the fire, Mr. Miles’ head was brought out in strong relief, and from the blow he had received his face was very pale.

“See here,” Bridget heard him say to the big man who stood a little apart; “see here, you are the biggest and strongest amongst us, till the life-boat comes you must take the end of the rope and hold it.”

No surprise was ever greater than that which stupefied the man, as the Vicar continued, as he drew him aside:

“You dealt me a heavy blow just now, but, by God’s mercy, I escaped the full force of it. You know I can summon you for assault. I am not going to do so. Let me see you prove your manhood now by doing your utmost to save life, and give up all mean base notions of making traffic of the property of the dead. — Now then, my men, let us be ready.”

CHAPTER IX.

COALS OF FIRE.

“While a man can keep his courage and his temper he is not only never really beaten, but no man can tell what great things God may give him to do.” — CHARLES KINGSLEY.

THE struggling ship came hurrying on to meet her doom. Just as the men were formed in line, with a stout cable which had been found at the empty coastguard cottage close by, a mountainous wave struck the poor schooner with resistless force. She leaped upwards, like a deer in its death-agony, and parted asunder in the midst; then, by the red glare of the fire on the shore, she was seen to be breaking up with fearful rapidity, while, from a dark mass gathered together at her stern, a cry rose above the raging waters and angry tempest, which made Bridget hide her face in her hands, and turn away for a moment.

Only for a moment—the next she was listening to the shout of the men with the rope; and, as another wave struck the ship, followed by another smaller one, the dark mass disappeared, and the crew were struggling in the blinding surf. The white foam showed the black spots here and there, where a head was raised for a moment above the surf, and then disappeared again.

The first figure in the sea Bridget saw was

Mr. Miles, and abreast with him the athletic form of poor Bill Brownson's brother, who was likely to prove one of the Vicar's warmest champions.

So near was the sand, that those on shore seemed to be within easy reach of those who were fighting for life in the angry, hissing billows; but hard indeed it was to help. Again and again the outstretched arm seemed to grasp the rope thrown out by the vanguard of those who were themselves baffled repeatedly, and with difficulty maintained any footing on the slippery, treacherous sand. At last one man seized the rope, and was dragged to shore. Bridget, who had hitherto stood as a spectator, now ran to the prostrate form, which was laid down with care, and chafed the cold hands. When consciousness returned, she helped the man to one of the little huts, where two women had kindled a fire and prepared for the relief of the shipwrecked people.

They were rough, untaught women, and, till Mr. Miles had come to East Repton, they had never heard the sound of the Gospel of Peace. Now they had no words to express their astonishment at seeing the Parson, who had spoken to them so earnestly, on friendly terms with that ruffian, Ned Rushton.

"He's allus down here after no good, the brute," one of the women said; "he's a thorough bad c'racter—that's what he be; and it is only last fall I see him after what might get him sent to prison for life, and a good riddance, too. Eh! and here's another," the woman broke off to say.

At last the brave men relaxed their exertions, and Mr. Miles, bending over one of the rescued men, asked:

"How many did your crew number?"

"Fifteen souls," was the reply, "and a woman and her baby. She was the mate's wife."

"A woman!" Mr. Miles repeated. "Then she is lost—and we only count twelve men here," he added.

"It seems to me," said Jim Brownson, "that I see a something clinging to the wreck; maybe it's the poor creature."

The man who had spoken in reply to Mr. Miles' question, now raised himself on his elbow, and, shading his eyes with his hand, peered out into the darkness, athwart which the red flame made a lurid pathway to the wreck.

"Yes," the man said, "that be a living soul. God help her, for I do believe it is the mate's wife he set such store by."

"An attempt must be made to save her, before it is too late," Mr. Miles said. "Now, my men, who will come with me?"

He was tying the rope once more round his waist when he spoke, and then a chorus rose:

"It's no sort of use, sir. Your reverence must see the tide's turning; you'd be washed out to sea. It's just a-going to meet your death."

Mr. Miles turned to the men and said: "Well, I am ready—and I think I can save her. Who will come with me?" Bridget's heart sank within

her as Mr. Miles repeated the question, adding: "Am I to go alone?"

"No," said a gruff voice. "I be a-coming with you."

"Oh, no, no!" Bridget exclaimed, going up Mr. Miles, and laying her hand upon his arm; "you must not let that man go with you!"

But Mr. Miles did not answer, though he looked down on her with eyes in which a strange tenderness was gleaming. He put her hand gently aside, and then, turning to the man, Ned Rushton, said, "Shake hands first, and let us commend ourselves to the Lord; it may go hard with us." The great horny fingers closed over Mr. Miles', and only his ear caught the words:

"I'll do my best. Let me go alone."

"No, no;" and once more Mr. Miles was battling with the surf-crested billows, now retreating rapidly and increasing the danger, though the current swept the two men towards the wreck with amazing speed.

The ropes were held by strong, willing hands, and were strained to their utmost. Presently a shout was heard, and Bridget could distinguish Mr. Miles' voice—it was the shout of victory. Soon the flames, leaping up with the added furze and wood heaped upon the fire, showed distinctly the figures of the two men, each with something in his arms, struggling to regain the shore.

The receding tide was strong, and the men could hardly keep their hold on the ropes, so forcibly did the waves drive back the burdens at the

other end. By this time a group of spectators had collected. Hickes was there, and Tom, and his brother from the Vicarage, and the Squire's keeper, and many men from the village.

"They'll never do it. I've seen the same tried on before. The waves is too much for 'em," was heard on all sides.

The scene was one never to be forgotten; and Bridget's whole soul seemed to go up in prayer, that the brave, unselfish man, who could thus risk his life, and render good for evil, blessing for cursing, should be kept safe.

I cannot say how the hearts of those wild, untaught people were moved by this act of devotion; for nothing makes an impression like the sight of actual self-forgetfulness, and honesty of deed as well as of word.

The people recognised all this in the Vicar; but only Bridget knew that the tall figure so heavily burdened, seen by the fitful firelight to be struggling for life in the seething water, was working side by side with one who had vowed vengeance on him scarcely an hour before, and had struck him a blow which he intended should stop him, at least, from any interference with the wrecked ship for that time, and leave him free to follow his wicked intentions; and thus Bridget only could really appreciate what was the Christ-like devotion of the Vicar's deed of chivalrous self-forgetfulness.

At length it was over, that fierce conflict with the angry, surging billows! The woman was laid on the beach, alive, her hair falling in dark

heavy masses over her shoulders, and her dead baby by her side: for the little life had sighed itself back to God who gave it, amidst the roaring of the sea; and, as Mr. Miles put it down, he fell forward, exhausted.

The gigantic figure of Ned Rushton came behind with a half-drowned boy under his arm; and as he also fell upon the sand, she heard Mr. Miles say:

"Thank God, you have saved a life, Rushton, instead of taking one, to-night. Let us be friends."

The stout, rough, ill-conditioned man bowed his head in his arms, unwonted tears came to his eyes, and his heart heaved with emotion. He was won by that great conqueror—Love. He was subdued by the force of the old panacea for the conflicts and strife, the malice and heart-burnings of a sad world: "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." The coals of fire were burning on the brow of this rugged, care-nought fisherman that night; and the Vicar went home rejoicing.

By noon the following day a great calm had succeeded to the raging storm, and a soft balmy evening, more like April than December, was bathing the leafless woods in a subdued tender light. The moon, rising in her first quarter, hung like a silver bow in the clear sky, and in the west there was a band of rose colour fading into pink, which mingled again with the palest daffodil tint before it was merged with the pale greyish blue above.

Bridget Rochemont was on Snowdrop, riding slowly across the path over the Old Beacon Hill, and unattended, as was her custom.

She had been much tried and over-wrought with the scene of the previous night, and the actual bodily exertion had been perhaps more than she had ever encountered before. Most people would have resigned themselves to rest, or rather idleness, under such circumstances—but not Bridget Rochemont.

The morning had been spent in doing her best to help in sending the poor shipwrecked people to their homes; and then there were arrangements to make for the funeral of the baby, and the captain and mate of the schooner, who had perished. It was feared that both had so frequently had recourse to the rum cask during the storm, that when the need for action became imperative, they were helpless and undecided. This at least was the opinion of one of the seamen, who seemed to exercise a fatherly care over the young widow who was lying at the cottage where she had first been carried, in a stupor of grief.

The ship's cargo of Norwegian timber was partly saved, and the little chine of East Repton was all alive with busy workers, some of whom perhaps had an eye to their own interests far too much. The loss of the vessel was telegraphed from Wycheater to the owners, and there were many whispers amongst the sailors that the *Betsy* had been utterly unseaworthy, and that her fate

was as much the result of her unsound condition as of the raging storm.

As Bridget drew up Snowdrop by the Old Beacon, the quiet sea—which had gradually sunk to the most perfect rest, as a child sleeps after a stormy fit of passion on his pillow—lay outstretched before her.

The Old Beacon had once been a lighthouse, but that was long ago, and it was now only a ruined tower, falling in on one side, and with nothing picturesque in its outline; but it was a favourite resort for all the Rochemonts, and many a time had a kettle been boiled here in summer, and that most delightful institution, tea out of doors, been enjoyed by the children of the Hall and the Cottage. But Bride's thoughts were not now in the far past; she was holding a consultation with herself as to whether she should ride home past the Vicarage and inquire for Mr. Miles, or whether she should content herself with sending Tom.

"If Madame were at home she would go at once, or Maude, or even Janet, and why should not I?"

And then, in spite of herself, there was an obtrusive thought which brought the colour to her face, and made her exclaim, as she gave Snowdrop a smart touch with the whip and gathered up her reins:

"How absurd! of course I ought to go. He would have been down himself to the shore this

morning if he had not been ill, and it is most uncivil not to inquire for him."

As Bridget was cantering towards home, with the free sweet air blowing in her face, she did not meet a single person, so scantily was that district peopled in those days; though now, within the last two years, the railway has changed everything with its stern iron will.

As Bridget reached the high-road she slackened her pace, and rode quietly and sedately past the Hall, with its closed shutters and calm desolation, and turned Snowdrop's head towards the Vicarage.

Ben was at the gate, and on seeing him, Bridget alighted, and said:

"Are you to be trusted to hold Snowdrop for two minutes, Ben, or will you go to sleep like Tom, and let her kick the Vicar's paling down?"

Ben's usually broad grin failed him for once.

"The Vicar is very bad," he said; "he has been and had the doctor. I was coming down to the Cottage with this note, miss."

Bridget took a note from the boy's hand, and with some difficulty read, in the now fading light, a few irregular lines written in pencil, as follows:

"DEAR MISS ROCHEMONT,

"The blow on my head, and the cold bath afterwards, have been too much for me. Earle says I must keep quiet, and get the duty taken for Christmas Day. Will you kindly write to your

brother Blake for me: he may help to find some one. Mrs. Bond will do as you wish about the Christmas-tree. I want Rushton to be invited to the Christmas-tree, and the tea afterwards.

"Yours ever,

"STEPHEN MILES."

Bridget was standing midway in the drive, reading her letter, when Mrs. Bond appeared at the door.

"Will you please to come in, Miss Rochemont?" she said, with a profound curtsy—a little too great a demonstration of respect, Bridget thought. "Please to step into *my* room," she repeated, as Bridget hesitated. "This is what I expected. I wish we had never left Cambridge, I do; to come and live amongst a set of South Sea Islanders, for I am sure they are no better. I suppose you know, Miss Rochemont, a ruffian gave the Vicar a blow on the head last evening; and though nothing will tempt him to give the name, *I* know who it was—one of those Brownsons, brother to the poor fellow who died of the fever. Of course he ought to be put in the hands of the police, and shut up out of harm's way; but Mr. Miles is that determined, no words of mine have any effect. I only wish Lady Julia was here, she can manage the Vicar."

"Where—I mean, who is Lady Julia?" Bridget asked.

"She is the Vicar's sister-in law, Lady Julia Miles. She has been living abroad for some time ;

but it is my opinion, if she had been in England, she would not have allowed the Vicar to bury himself here; but she has been living in a foreign city, ever since Mr. Miles' death. Well, now, Miss Rochemont, you are to please to give orders about this tea, and Christmas-tree, and I will attend to them."

"I am acting for my cousin, Mrs. Rochemont, at the Hall," Bridget said, "and I have all her gifts to dispense in the village in her absence. I think Mr. Miles has a list of names, which I should be glad to have again, if you would ask him for it. And tell him, please, that I will try to do all he wishes, and write to my brother, Mr. Blake Rochemont, at once. I shall have time to catch the post at Rendlesham, if I send there; the bag will have gone with our letters before I get home."

"If you would like to write here, Miss Rochemont, I see no objection. You can find pens and paper on Mr. Miles' writing-table, if you will walk this way, and then I can send Ben to Rendlesham."

Mrs. Bond led the way to the library, that pleasant room which Bridget and Maude had examined on their first visit, now looking desolate and empty without the Vicar's presence.

"Will you kindly send Ben down to the Cottage with Snowdrop? I do not like her to stand so long, and I may be some minutes writing my letter. Tell Ben to lead Snowdrop care-

fully," Bridget said, as Mrs. Bond departed to give her orders.

The paper and pens Mrs. Bond had spoken of were in great abundance on the writing-table: and this was in all the strange confusion which need not be described to those who have seen the like. Mrs. Miles himself could have doubtless found all he wanted, but to the uninitiated the chaos looked hopeless.

Some directed envelopes with Christmas greetings were apparently set high above the rest, on the upright edge of the table, and Bridget saw the address of one—the Lady Julia Miles, Sidonien-Strasse, Dresden—with some interest.

It was strange, that in all the many conversations Mr. Miles and Bridget had had together, the name of this sister-in-law, whom the old housekeeper quoted as an authority, had never been mentioned.

But if Ben were to catch the post at Rendlesham there was no time to lose, and Bridget wrote rapidly a few words to Blake, and to Maude also, asking them to do what they could to supply the needs of East Repton on Christmas Day.

Both notes were ready in a very few minutes, and then Bridget returned to Mrs. Bond's room, and found her waiting in expectation.

"Mr. Miles heard your voice below, Miss Rochemont; and I was to say he was greatly obliged to you for calling, and that he hoped

you were none the worse for the gale last night, and the——”

“Oh no, thank you,” Bridget interrupted hastily. “Tell Mr. Miles I am quite well, and I hope he will soon be better. There is no time to lose about these letters. Where is Ben? he ought to be back from the Cottage by now. I must go and meet him;” and Bridget went swiftly down the lane. She looked right and left, but no Ben was visible.

“Tiresome, dawdling boy!” she exclaimed; “all the Williamsses are alike; they are always half asleep.”

As the words escaped her, a huge man emerged from the shadow of the hedge on the opposite side of the road, and, coming up to Bridget, said:

“Will you tell me how the Parson be to-day?”

“He is very ill,” Bridget said. “The blow on his head, and then the struggle with the waves, has made him very ill.”

She spoke as steadily as she could, but her heart beat fast as she continued:

“You are Ned Rushton, I think?”

The man’s brow grew dark.

“Yes, I be; and what’s that to you?”

“I have a message from Mr. Miles for you, that is all. He hopes that you will come to the Christmas-tree and tea in the schoolroom, on Thursday. But I am so anxious to get these

letters into the post at Rendlesham. What can Ben be doing?"

"I'll take the letters," the man said, "if it's to serve the Parson."

"Yes, it is to serve Mr. Miles," Bridget said. "Will you really take them?"

"Aye, for sure," said the man; "and look 'ee here, tell the Parson that there'll not be a stick or a stone left of my place by next Thursday. I'm pulling it down with my own hands, and I have been and sent my missus and the brats to Rollestone, to my mother-in-law: then I'm off, and a good riddance of bad rubbish."

Bridget had no time to rejoin, for the letters were taken out of her hand, and with great strides, like those of the giant in a fairy tale, Ned Rush-ton disappeared down the road.

Presently Ben was seen advancing in the opposite direction, in a careless leisurely manner, a little switch in his hand, and a bit of straw between his lips.

Bridget allowed him to come up to her without any sign of recognition; and when he came to a dead stop, and touched his cap, she said, sternly, "Well, Ben."

"Please, miss, I've taken Snowdrop home, and Mr. Hickes he put her in the stable; and please miss, will Mrs. Bond give me the letters?"

"No, indeed, you idle boy! if we had waited for you, the letters would have been too late for the post at Rendlesham. You have been exactly three times as long going to the Cottage as you

ought to have been. I am sorry to see you are quite as slow and lazy as your brother;" and so Bridget passed on.

Ben's good-tempered face clouded over a little and he muttered to himself, as he let the gate of the Vicarage swing behind him, "She'll be one to keep us all going when she comes here, as come she will, for all Mrs. Bond may say."

The duty at East Repton was taken on Christmas Day, and on many succeeding Sundays.

Village lectures and readings, and the alterations at Money's Corner, alike came to a standstill. Day after day passed, week after week, and the Vicar's tall form was absent from the church and the village, and his voice was heard no more amongst his people.

Then, as is so commonly the case, the people of East Repton knew how they loved what they had lost, and lamentations were heard on every side. Rheumatic fever set in with great severity two or three days after the night of the shipwreck and on New Year's Day Mr. Miles' life was in danger. Then, when the severity of the symptoms decreased, a low feverish condition followed, and "The Vicar is much the same," was the hopeless-sounding bulletin for many weeks. A friend of of Blake's, Mr. Moore, came to take the Sunday duty, and by Bridget's exertions the school-work was kept going, and the night-school, which Mr. Miles had opened three weeks before his accident, continued. She went and taught writing and read-

ing herself, and enlisted the sympathies of the blind boy's father in the work, and surprised her mother and her brothers by the zeal and energy she displayed. But it was hard work, and sad work too. If only Madame had been at home, and her cousins, it would have been easier. Little by little, moreover, she became conscious that the motive of what she did was misunderstood, and that foolish rumours were afloat about her. Mrs. Dacre was the head and fount of these, and many of the neighbours joined in them; so that Bridget needed all her heroism to persevere.

In the Cottage also, as well as in the village, anxieties pressed. It was plain to every one that Ria was suffering from her husband's prolonged silence.

The two letters, written soon after Anthony's arrival at San Francisco, had not been followed by others; and the poor little wife drooped and languished, as day after day passed, and still no word came from her husband.

Bridget was with her one soft bright February afternoon, when she suddenly turned to her and said:

"Bride, do you think Anton is dead?"

"Oh dear, no!" said Bridget, coolly. "He has most probably gone off on some expedition into uncivilised parts, and so cannot write."

"But he had got a situation. He was doing well. He said he would send me money; and I know he would keep his word to me if he could."

Bridget made no reply. Her faith in her brother was small. She had so frequently experienced how little he was to be trusted. But Ria's heavy, weary sigh, as she relapsed into silence, touched her, and presently she said more gently:

"You must try not to be so anxious, Ria. I do really think Anthony is safe and well, and that we shall soon hear from him."

"Perhaps it will be too late for me, Bridget," Ria said. "I wish I could see Mr. Miles. Will he never come here again, and Madame, and Blake? I should like to see Blake."

"Blake would come at once, if you wished, Ria; but can I do nothing for you?"

"No, Bridget. I cannot say to you what I could to them."

Bridget felt this as a thrust, and she answered:

"Perhaps you think, Ria, because I say little I do not feel for you. That is a mistake. I know your position is a trying one, and I know that you must be very anxious about your husband."

"My husband! and your brother," Ria said. "It is this which is too hard. You do not love Anton. You would not care—you would be glad—if you never saw him again; and there is a hard, hard look in your eyes when you speak of him."

"You are quite right to love him, Ria, and you must know I love him as my brother," Bridget

said gently, almost tenderly. "Come, make the violin talk to me, and I shall like it so much. Brighter days will come. Madame says they mean to be at the Hall by Easter, and Maude is coming, too, to the High Bank House. So we shall all cheer up then, after a long, dark winter. Spring is coming now."

"Spring is coming," Ria repeated. "'*Les beaux jours reviendront.*' Poor papa used to say that, and sing it; but they never came for him, and they will never come for me—not here. But one day, if, indeed, it is true what Madame told me, and Maude tells me, the love of Jesus I may enter in where there is everything that is beautiful. Yet, oh!" she said, clasping her hands with sudden passion and earnestness, "that is it, Bride. Bride, I don't want to die. I want to live and see him once more."

"Hush, dear Ria!" Bridget said, afraid that this agitation would hurt her. "Hush! You must not talk so."

"Talk, how?—if I am to die, it is better to talk of it. Oh, Bridget, will you tell Mr. Miles I want to see him? I do so want to see him."

"But he is not well enough to come out, Ria. I have not seen him for many weeks. Still, I will tell him about you, if you like; I write to him sometimes about the parish."

"He is noble and true," Ria said. "He would do any one good; I know that. But don't write

to him. Leave it till he gets well. It might trouble him. I do not wish to trouble him."

But Bridget thought over all that her sister-in-law had said, and determined to let Mr. Miles know, what was becoming more and more obvious to her and to every one at the Cottage, that Ria was perceptibly weaker and more ill, and that the dark shadow of fear which oppressed her was not groundless. She still took pleasure in Tiero's visits; and it became now almost a settled thing that the boy should come in the morning, and dine at the Cottage with the servants, and then play with Nina, whose devoted subject he was.

As Bridget was thinking over her note to Mr. Miles, and determining that she would also summon Blake, there was a sound of feet coming up the passage, and Ria roused herself.

"It is Nina and Tiero!" she exclaimed. "They have been into the woods."

The door opened, and the blind boy came in, with Nina holding his hand, and calling out in her childish treble:

"Tiero and me have heard a 'frush' singing. Tiero says spring is coming, as 'frushes' have begun to sing. He knows all the little song-birds by their voices. Take care, Tiero; you'll fall over Aunt Bride's basket, and she'll be so cross."

Nina and Tiero made, unconsciously, a beautiful picture as they went up to Ria's chair. Tiero hung over it, while Nina lay down in the outstretched arms, murmuring, "Best mother, loving mother, is you tired now?"

"Madre is always tired, my own. Come, Tiero, play, over and over, the song I taught you yesterday. Ah, give me the violin, and I will play it first." And then the little white hands, with an almost imperceptible movement, brought out the strains of a song from Mendelssohn's "Elijah," which has spoken peace and rest to many hearts:

"Oh, rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him."

"Ah!" Ria said, as the last-drawn note died away into silence, "I used to sing it to my mother; and once I sang it at a concert, and afterwards there was a lady who told papa she wished to speak to me alone, and papa brought her to the little room behind the concert-hall, and when we were alone together, she took my hands and kissed them, and said my voice had touched her and given her comfort; that she had had a great trouble, which had turned her heart into stone, and that she had not cared what became of her; and that the music, and the promise of rest in God, had made her pray to find it. I was young and happy then. It was long, long before I knew Anton; and I was, oh, so sorry for the poor lady: but I forgot her soon, with her white, sad face, and her trouble; but now it all comes back, and I must do as she did—pray to find the rest."

Bridget turned away, and left Ria with the children, feeling sad and depressed, and yet telling herself that Anton's return, for which Ria was

longing, would scarcely be welcome to her. If it were in her power to write to Anthony, she would, she felt, be unwilling to do it, and she knew she was secretly glad that it was out of her power.

Bridget's mind had the tenacious hold of the past which natures like hers often manifest. She could not forget; and even this afternoon, when she felt the most genuine sympathy with Ria, the memory of her father's sorrow from Anthony's misdoings was present with her, and weighed heavily on her. Before she went to her mother, she turned into the little study, so full of associations with her father, and sat down to write to Blake and Mr. Miles. As she seated herself at the table, a note lying there, in a strange handwriting, attracted her attention.

"Who can this be from?" she exclaimed; and then Katherine came in.

"The boy from the Vicarage will call for an answer, Miss Rochemont. I was just coming up to Mrs. Anthony's room to tell you."

Bridget, while Katherine was speaking, had opened the crested envelope, and was reading the contents.

"DEAR MISS ROCHEMONT,

"Can you come and see me at the Vicarage? My brother-in-law's letters have brought me here to try if I can be of use in rousing him from the depression consequent on an illness in this isolated region.

"He needs variety and fresh interests. He speaks of your family as his chief friends in the neighbourhood. We dine at 7.30; and if you will come, it will be a real kindness.

"Forgive me for thus taking for granted that you will not be offended with the freedom of my request.

"Yours truly,

"JULIA J. MILES."

"Lady Julia!" Bridget exclaimed; "go to dine with her! no indeed. Let her come and see me if she wants me, and so I shall tell her."

"Is there any answer, Miss Rochemont?" Katherine asked.

"I will write one, if Ben waits." And Bridget's ready pen flew swiftly over a sheet of note-paper, and pressing it quickly, almost angrily in her blotting-book, she addressed it, giving Lady Julia her full style and title, with a scornful impetuous turn of her pen over the T in 'The.'

"There, that is the answer, Katherine." And when the note was on its way to the Vicarage, borne thither by Ben, with slow, lagging steps, Bridget remembered that she had two others to write, Blake's and Mr. Miles's.

"I thought you were never coming, Bride," was Mrs. Rochemont's greeting, with a yawn, as Bridget appeared at last in the little drawing-room. "You are so much with Ria now."

"I think Ria is weaker, mother; and I think this anxiety about Anthony is killing her. I have

been writing to Blake, and I hope he will come next week."

"What can Blake do? He can't bring Anthony, and he is so engrossed with his reading."

"Not too much engrossed to be of use, I hope, and poor Ria wants to see him."

Mrs. Rochemont sighed, and began to bemoan her position, going over the old sad story of Anthony, and saying, what Bridget could never hear patiently, that if poor Anthony had had a larger allowance, things might have been different.

A light of indignant protest blazed in Bridget's eyes, and she was about to begin a sharp, cutting speech, when she stopped. What right had she to vindicate her father at the expense of forgetting her duty to her mother? Moreover, he wanted no vindication. He had done all, and more than all, to help and save Anthony, and no one with any right feeling could doubt it.

"I have had a letter from Bernard Wentworth, Bridget," Mrs. Rochemont began, after a pause. "I think he is hurt at your silence, and he says he could spare a few days and come to us after Easter, if we wished. I don't really understand why, because a heartless girl has turned him off, we should do so too."

"Who has turned him off, mother?" Bridget said. "Bernard has been free to come and go here all his life; why should he stand on ceremony now?"

"Well, I shall write to him, and say we shall be very glad to see him. The mills, or whatever

they are, are doing well, he says. Lord Frampton and a good many of the neighbours have found him out, and he seems quite to take his proper position."

"Did you imagine Bernard could take any other, mother?" Bridget said, with a little laugh. "He always holds his own."

"Well, I am very sorry for him," Mrs. Rochemont said. "It must have been a dreadful humiliation to him to have his affairs talked about as they were in Florence, in the English society there. I am sure he has had a happy escape, however. I never did like governesses."

"Don't say that, mother; for I always think I have missed my vocation in life, and that I shall end in being a governess at last."

"Nonsense, Bridget. I wish you would be sensible. Have you heard that Mr. Miles has got a guest at the Vicarage—Lady Julia Miles? She has brought a maid and a man with her, and is quite upsetting that quiet household with grand ways; dining at eight o'clock: and it is so bad for Mr. Miles, now he is so much of an invalid."

"What gossip!" Bridget exclaimed, "Katherine's, of course."

"Katherine's! No indeed; Mr. Earle's. He told me all about it this morning, and he says he does not feel sure that Mr. Miles will ever be the same man again; he does not get up his strength, and he seems to have lost his energy and interest in everything."

"Scarcely that," Bride said; "for all the work-

ing of the parish is referred to him now by Mr. Moore, and he sees him about the people every day. He will soon be well; Mr. Earle is so fond of killing every one."

"Well, Dr. Wright says the same; and I don't suppose you know better than the doctors. Will you call on Lady Julia?"

"I think not," Bridget said. "I don't know; perhaps I may;" and with this very undecided answer, Bridget sat down to read the *Wycheater Chronicle* to her mother, which had been sent in the post-bag that afternoon.

As she read, an undercurrent of thought was going on.

Lady Julia's note. Ought she to have replied in a different fashion? Was it courteous? What would be thought of it at the Vicarage? She did not come to the question *who* would think of her note or, if she did, she left it, with many other questions, unanswered.

CHAPTER X.

THE "CANON" LAW.

"If we have souls, know how to see and use,
One place performs, like any other place,
The proper service every place on earth
Was planned to furnish man with—serves alike
To give him note that, through the place he sees,
A place is signified he never saw,
But if he lack not soul, may learn to know."

R. BROWNING.

THE library at the Vicarage was lighted by

the cheerful blaze of a wood fire, and the soft lustre of two pretty lamps which had been trimmed for use in honour of Lady Julia's visit. Mr. Miles and his sister-in-law had dined alone at the small table in the little ante-room, in which Mr. Surcombe, the man-servant, declared you could "not swing a cat," much less "wait upon the gentry." He did manage, however, to go through the prescribed form with something of his accustomed pompous dignity; and Mr. Miles, leaning back wearily in his chair, opposite Lady Julia, wondered how long it would last, and where all the little unwonted *entrées* and delicacies came from.

He turned away from them with no appetite, and Lady Julia, whose intentions were thoroughly kind, was disappointed. "It shows what we come to," she thought, "if we accustom ourselves to coarse living, large joints, and potatoes in their skins."

"Stephen," she said at last, when, to the Vicar's immense relief, some grapes and biscuits were placed on the table, and Surcombe withdrew—"Stephen, I know this first coming downstairs is a great effort, but indeed it will do you good. You want variety now; and I am so glad I came to ensure it."

"It is very kind of you, Julia, to take so much trouble about me. I am afraid I am a hopeless subject."

"Not at all, my dear Stephen. I assure you, I see a marked change already. You have been much better to-day; and though sitting down to

a proper meal may be an effort, you will be rewarded: I know you will. After all you told me of the Rochemont family, I was curious to see Miss Rochemont, and I wrote her a little note, and asked her to come and dine with us this evening."

"Surely not!" Mr. Miles exclaimed; "surely not!"

"And why not? A bright intelligent girl of five-and-twenty is just the variety you need, and——"

"But, Julia, it was hardly the thing to—well—take the initiative like that."

"Nonsense. In a country village like this girls are only too thankful to get an invitation. Perhaps I had better have asked her for to-morrow, but I wanted her to celebrate your first appearance, you know. Yes; we will go into the library; put your arm in mine."

But Mr. Miles rejected the proffered help, and walked with the lurch of weakness into the library, where he sank heavily into his armchair. Lady Julia's grey silk train made a gentle rustle as she followed her brother-in-law into the room.

She was a woman who prided herself on her excellent judgment, her *savoir vivre*, her widespread sympathies, and her power over others. She was scarcely past middle age, and had everything about her which could make her appearance complete. Deficiencies of hair were made up with borrowed plaits, and her dress was always appropriate and fashionable. She believed herself to be

a religious woman, and could descant on many topics of interest—mission work, home missions, and charitable institutions—with great eloquence. She would do a kindness readily, but spoiled it by exacting a full acknowledgment, and what she called appreciation.

She was a cousin of her husband on the maternal side. Thus there was the tie of blood relationship, as well as marriage, between herself and Mr. Miles. She had loved her husband as such women can love, and managed him so admirably that he never guessed to the last that he was managed at all. She had, as Mrs. Bond had told Bridget, influence over Mr. Miles also. She bore down upon him with many sheets of foreign letter paper, when she heard he had accepted a country living, and she always said, if she had been on the spot, it would have been prevented.

A faintly, irregularly written letter from Mr. Miles, received just as her plans were a little undecided, decided them at once. She would go to East Repton and see what could be done. She would urge a London opinion; she would do her best to move Mr. Miles; she would get him to exchange with some London clergyman, for a parish where he could rub against others, and not turn into a fossil or a vegetable. Since she had seen Mr. Miles her views had altered a little. An English chaplaincy in a foreign town, where he could see plenty of society, would be his best cure; for really it was piteous to see a man so thrown away. Meanwhile, the man who was

"thrown away" was lying back in his chair, half-dreamily watching Lady Julia's white fingers sparkling with jewels, which shimmered and twinkled as she drew the needle through the embroidery at which she was working slowly, deliberately, yet surely.

"Did Miss Rochemont answer your note, Julia?" the Vicar asked after a silence.

"Yes, very shortly and decidedly. I suppose she has seen nothing of the world."

"Will you call on Mrs. Rochemont to-morrow?" was the next question.

"Stephen! it is her place to call on me. You surely do not forget the alphabet of social life."

Mr. Miles laughed the low laugh which he had not done for many a day, as he said:

"But your note to Miss Rochemont was taking the initiative: is not that the right word?"

"Yes, I allow all that; but really I did not think it necessary to stand on any ceremony with a girl leading this retired life."

"We certainly do not see many people at East Repton; but Miss Rochemont has lived a great deal in Wychester."

"Yes, a dull cathedral town, with old-fashioned notions; governed by the law of Dean and Chapter, like that of the Medes and Persians. No life can narrow the mind like that led by cathedral cities. Of course, there are exceptions, but as a rule no class are so absurdly conscious of their own importance as deans' and canons' wives. It always

used to amuse me when I visited Henrietta Coventry at Sarell Deanery. She used to think herself and her spacious old house next to the Queen and Buckingham Palace. Poor thing! all her little jealousies of the Bishop's wife, and her misery about a curate who had the misfortune to be a peer's son, and so took precedence of her Dean, were so intensely ridiculous."

And Lady Julia went on through manifold reminiscences of cathedral cities, and other cities. Her voice was low and pleasant, and she considered she was amusing Mr. Miles and taking him out of himself, while all the time he was listening without understanding, and wondering much if Bridget was really offended by his sister-in-law's attempt at patronage, and whether it would have the effect of keeping her at a distance for a long time to come.

Many a time during his illness had he rehearsed that stormy afternoon, when Bridget was his companion in the twilight walk to the beach: many a time had her voice sounded in his ear, as she knelt by him after Ned Rushton's blow had felled him to the ground—and again, when he gained a footstep on the slippery sand, after that fierce conflict with the surf and billows. He seemed to hear her voice above it all: the clear, ringing voice, always like herself, so unfaltering and so true. He had just said "Yes," in an almost dreamy way, to one of his sister-in-law's stories, when Mrs. Bond appeared with the small silver salver, on which lay a note. Mrs.

Bond would not allow Surcombe to wait on her master; indeed, no very friendly relations existed between the housekeeper and "the confidential servant," as Lady Julia called the great Surcombe.

"Is it not time, sir, for you to go upstairs?" Mrs. Bond said, as she handed the note to Mr. Miles. "Dr. Wright was so very particular about hours." This was addressed to Mr. Miles, but Mrs. Bond was looking at Lady Julia, who seemed profoundly unconscious of her words. "You will excuse me, sir, for saying it is nearly half-past nine, and that your room is ready, and that this is your first evening downstairs."

"There is no answer to this note," Mr. Miles said. "Ask the household to come in to prayers. I wish it."

Mrs. Bond curtseyed and withdrew. Lady Julia's quick eye caught the writing on the envelope as Mr. Miles replaced the note there, and put it into his pocket. She drew her own inference, but was too wise to make any remark.

"Shall I read the Psalm or Lesson for you, Stephen?" she asked, as Mrs. Bond returned with the Prayer-book and Bible, and placed them on a small table by her master's side.

"No, thank you; I shall be very brief, but I wish to say a few words to the servants to-night."

"Ned Rushton, sir, is here; he has been at work in the garden all day this week, according to your orders," said Mrs. Bond; "is he to come to-morrow?"

"Certainly, and let me see him. Tell him

to come in to prayers, and I will speak to him afterwards."

"He is all in his working clothes, sir."

"Let him come," Mr. Miles said, in the tone Mrs. Bond knew well—a tone which meant there was to be no further discussion.

Then, following the fine maid, and the lofty Surcombe, Mrs. Bond, and Ben Williams, the poor ragged "Esau," who had been won by the power of love, came quietly in. Ben brought a wooden stool by Mrs. Bond's order, and signed to Ned Rushton to occupy it. But he did not obey; he stood just within the door, his large rough hands clasped before him, his head bent forward, gazing earnestly and wistfully at Mr. Miles, who was leaning back in the deep chair by the fire. The Vicar!—the strong, tall gentleman he remembered, with the keen glance, and with the deep-set, earnest eyes—the Vicar! could that pale, languid face be his?

Ned Rushton felt a great choking at his throat, and, when Mr. Miles sat upright, and began to read from the large Bible, his whole soul seemed to go out in deep, hungry attention.

"God is love," read the Vicar, "and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him;" and again: "Herein is love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and gave His Son to be the Propitiation for our sins."

The few brief words that followed made an impression on all the hearers' hearts. Surcombe said to himself that the Vicar was a very good

speaker. Mrs. Tilney thought it was a good lesson for Mrs. Bond, who was so full of herself, and thought so little of other people. Ben—even dull, slow-thinking Ben—listened, and thought he would try to give up hitting his next brother so often on the head when he provoked him; and Lady Julia could only say to herself that a man with such power of speaking was wasted where he was, and that she *must* try to get him moved to a wider sphere.

But Ned Rushton's thoughts were none of these. As soft rain distils in the rugged, hard earth, and permeates with subtle power, so did the words penetrate into the secret depths of that man's arid soul. He fastened on the words with eagerness: "'Herein is love; *not* that we loved God, but that He loved us'—us, every soul amongst us—for whom He gave His Son."

When the others knelt, Rushton hesitated; he scarcely ever remembered bending his knees in prayer; then, as Mr. Miles prayed, he dropped down, covering his face with his hands: and, when the servants rose and prepared to leave the room, he staggered to his feet, and his cheeks were wet with tears.

"Stop one moment, Rushton"—it was the Vicar's voice—"come here, for I make rather a poor hand at walking, and can't come to you."

Mr. Miles held out his hand, as if to encourage the man, and Rushton, with two or three awkward strides, reached it, and, seizing it, bowed his head over it.

"I am glad to see you, Rushton, and to hear such good news of you from Mr. Moore and Miss Rochemont. We will see about a better home for you than the old place. There's a little bit of ground I have in my eye, and we will have your wife and children there before many months."

Rushton's voice failed him; he tried to speak, but could not. The long, thin hand, bleached with illness; the pallor of the Vicar's face—all seemed to be as nails driven into his very heart.

"I shall never get over this here," he muttered at last: "you that are bound almost to hate me—you that I have brought down—why, it seems as if you cared for me! I don't know how to bear it; I can't even ask you to forgive me—I can't."

"There is no need; it was done long ago—and God's love is here as everywhere. If you are to be a new man, Rushton, I shall not be sorry for all that is past. God bless you!"

Rushton strode out of the room, where the wondering Ben awaited him; and Lady Julia, putting some eau de Cologne on her handkerchief, said, "What a terrible-looking man, Stephen! Is he a specimen of the aborigines?"

"No; there are not many Ned Rushtons here—a giant of strength for evil in the past, and I pray God to be as strong for good in the future. We began our friendship with a little wholesome aversion, and I look forward to the time when Rushton will be a help to me in East Repton."

"You must have strong faith to believe that," said Lady Julia, as she assisted Mr. Miles to draw himself from the depths of his chair. "Good-night. You look fearfully tired, and have done more than I wished. I did not intend your first evening downstairs to be such a fatiguing one as you have made it."

"I am very well content with it, thanks," were Mr. Miles' parting words, as he went slowly upstairs to his room.

The next afternoon, when Lady Julia was seated alone in the library, Surcombe threw open the door, and announced Miss Rochemont.

Bridget came in with her colour a little heightened, and a certain proud dignity in her manner which seemed to set anything like patronage at defiance.

"She is come to apologise for not accepting my invitation," was Lady Julia's first thought; her next, "What an independent little person she is!"

"My mother," Bridget began, "begs me to apologise for not calling upon you, but she very seldom feels equal to pay visits."

"Thanks," Lady Julia said; "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, and shall hope to come and see Mrs. Rochemont soon."

"My mother would be very glad if you would make use of our pony-carriage. I ride so much that we do not often drive in it, except in the summer, when my mother gets out sometimes."

"You are very kind," Lady Julia responded.

"I think I shall propose taking my brother-in-law out in it, if the pony is quiet."

"Snowdrop is very steady, and even jog-trot in harness," Bridget said, and then conversation seemed to flag. The weather, the coming spring, the climate of East Repton, the storm and the shipwreck, and all Mr. Miles had suffered in consequence: these topics were exhausted. Bridget rose to take leave, when the Vicar came slowly in. The expression of surprise in Bridget's face, when she saw him so altered, was as great as poor Ned Rushton's had been. All the vigour of his manhood seemed to have died out of him; he looked older and greyer, and, having lost so much in width, his height—always above the average—seemed increased.

Lady Julia hastened to move a stool out of his way as he came towards the fire, and then bustled about to put a cushion in the chair.

Bridget meantime stood still, looking at Mr. Miles with a bright flush on her face, and something very like tears in her eyes. It was a relief when he spoke in his natural voice, and said, cheerfully:

"It is a long time since we met; I am glad to see you looking so well."

The gladness was in his eyes and the tone of his voice, as well as in the words themselves; and Bridget, generally so ready and quick with a response, did not find one ready.

"Julia," Mr. Miles said, "ring the bell; and let us commemorate my first afternoon in the

library since Christmas with one of Mrs. Bond's teas and sponge-cakes."

Lady Julia touched the handle of the bell rather languidly, and said, "I will order tea."

"Well, Miss Rochemont," Mr. Miles began; "you see I am well taken care of now. My sister-in-law has brought me out of my room, and the next step will be that I shall come down to the Cottage. I must see your sister, if possible. You think she is much worse?"

"Yes," Bridget said, "perceptibly weaker, and her nights are very sleepless. I think, perhaps, if she could have any news of my brother she might revive. I hope Blake will be here to-morrow; she would like to see him, but she says she longs to see you, though you must not come before it is quite prudent."

"I believe I am at the stage when fresh air will do me good."

"Not an east wind!" said Lady Julia decidedly—who was all this time thinking Miss Rochemont had not apologised or referred to her invitation.

Evidently Miss Rochemont had no intention of doing so; and very soon a bright and lively conversation was going on between the Vicar and his guest, to which Lady Julia listened as she sipped her tea and nibbled at the sponge-cake Surcombe handed rather scornfully, cut in wedges by Mrs. Bond's hand, thicker than he thought quite appropriate.

As Bridget took the familiar path to the Cottage, she felt happier than she had done for

a long time. It is always pleasant to know that we are understood, and that we give as much pleasure by conversation with another as we receive.

Then she was delighted to think Mr. Miles was better; he looked ill and thin and worn, but it no longer seemed impossible that he should take his place in the church again, and breathe the breath of more earnest life into the services which Mr. Moore held during Lent.

Bridget turned off—she scarcely knew why—towards the Hall. As she went through the drive, she saw early primroses peeping up from under the fallen leaves of the last year—emblems of the perpetual springing up of beauty and loveliness from the ruins of what seems decay and hopeless wreck.

At the Hall there were signs of life—ladders were set up against the house, and the windows were being painted and cleaned. The large heavy door stood open, and Bridget crossed the hall and went through the empty rooms where the carpets lay rolled or folded in heaps, and the chairs were piled together in a regular façade of legs and arms.

Bridget went out of the glass door, and crossed the mossy lawn to "Aunt Bridget's" greenhouse. Thoughts of that unknown cousin of hers always possessed her when she looked at this glass-house—very different to modern creations, and hardly an ornament where it stood: too far from the Hall to show the flowers it contained, and presenting

an appearance like a transparent Noah's ark. There was no dome, or light elegant iron tracery, or ornamented roof. Still the greenhouse was a monument of the lost Bridget's love for flowers; and as the present Bridget walked through it, she gathered a few blossoms of scarlet geranium and pale cyclamen for Ria, and sang to herself as she did so. An old gardener, who had left the doors open while he went to replenish the watering-can, now returned. He was only kept on as a link with the past by the Squire, and toddled about as he listed, doing scraps of work here and there.

"Good-afternoon, miss," he said, in answer to Bridget's greeting. "Niceish spring weather this be."

"Yes, and we are soon to see them all home again, Samuel; that is good news, is it not?"

"Ay, ay. I have no notion of them foreign parts. Why, they took poor Miss Bridget out there and never brought her back. You grow more like her every day, miss, begging your pardon. Standing there with the blossoms in your hand, you might be the Squire's sister come back again. Bless her heart, she was too good for this world. Them's the ones who are always taken."

"My father used to say I was like Miss Bridget, and I like to think I am. Good-bye, Samuel; you will soon have your own young ladies about here now. Little Miss Christine is very much grown, Madame says."

"Is she, bless her! There never was a finer family, never!" the old man muttered, as Bridget's light footsteps went swiftly over the grass.

Easter came, with all its wakening life, and birds and flowers, telling its own beautiful story of resurrection and renewal, bringing its yearly message from the dawn of that memorable day when death had no more dominion over the Lord of life.

Like swallows from afar, the Rochemonts flocked back to their homes in the quiet eastern corner of the kingdom, where the ever-swelling tide of modern life had not yet reached in all its force and power, sweeping away the old landmarks, and replacing red-tiled houses with paste-board villas, and dotting the quiet country-side with the sheds of railway stations and signs of traffic, which was to flood Rollestone with excursionist bands, and fashion at the sea-side.

The dear little East country watering-place may be changed now, but at the time of which I write it looked as it had done a hundred years before; and East Repton, with its three homes, its farmhouses and cottages, its scattered fishermen's huts, was untouched and unaltered by the zeal for modern improvements and modern accessibility.

All the cousins clustered round Bridget as they came out of church on Easter Sunday afternoon. Madame was returning the greeting of many of her people just outside the churchyard, and with the Squire's stately figure in the midst, Ambrose and his pretty wife, Blake, and Bernard Wentworth, the picture was one not easily to be forgotten by those who saw it. Lady Julia was talking to Mrs. Rochemont, and winning her by

sympathising inquiries about her health. Christine was engrossed with little Nina, who had made her first appearance in church, and had behaved with the utmost discretion.

"The clan is complete to-day, I suppose," Lady Julia was saying. "What a patriarchal group it is!"

"Yes," Mrs. Rochemont replied, "nearly complete. It is very pleasant to have the Hall inhabited again."

"It was quite right of the Squire to take those charming daughters to Italy. Nothing can widen the sympathies and educate the taste like a residence abroad."

Mrs. Rochemont assented rather faintly, for neither she nor Bridget had ever crossed the Channel, and the inference was that she lacked something others had.

"We are all going up to the Hall to tea, I hear, if Stephen ever comes out of the vestry; it is so very imprudent of him to linger. I wonder what he is doing. Ah! here he comes, and now I suppose we may walk onwards."

"Are you very tired?" Bridget asked, as Mr. Miles came up to her. "Perhaps you would rather not come to the Hall to tea?"

"I would much rather come," Mr. Miles said, "especially——" he stopped, for he felt Bernard's eyes were upon him, and he noticed that a cloud had settled on his brow.

"I am so glad," Bridget said, in her simple outspoken way. "This has been a happy day

I only wish poor Ria were not at home alone. I think I shall ask Christine to take Nina back to the Cottage;" and Bridget went on to speak to Christine and Mary, who were charmed with the admiration Nina excited amongst the village people, and were quite proud to show her off.

"Her mother is all alone," Bridget said; "would one of you mind taking Nina to the Cottage? I am sure Ria will think we are away such a long time." The girls were delighted to lead little Nina home; and Bridget, having settled that point, turned to join the rest of the party. She saw Bernard was waiting for her. His brow was dark, and his mouth compressed and stern.

"Well," he said, "I have been here three days now, and you have scarcely spoken to me; you are too much occupied with other people, I suppose. You are very much altered, Bride."

"Am I?" she tried to say lightly; "let me hope alteration means improvement. This is a happy day of reunion, Bernard. All our family in church together once more; for even poor Anthony was represented by little Nina; and then we are all so glad to have the Vicar in his place in church again."

Bernard switched the branches of the shrubs in the Hall plantation with his stick, but did not speak.

"How well Madame looks, and how pretty the girls are! They all strike me with the force of novelty after months of absence."

"Everything seems *couleur de rose* to you to-day, apparently," said Bernard bitterly.

"Yes, there is only one shadow over the brightness, and that is poor Ria's state. I do not believe she will live to see Anthony again. Dr. Wright has seen her twice, in consultation with Mr. Earle, during the last week, and thinks her condition very serious."

"You seem to think and care for every one but the person who wants it most," Bernard said. "I think those people who with their own hand destroy every chance of happiness, have far more need of sympathy than those who suffer from others. Do you suppose, Bridget, can you suppose, that I do not repent the past year, and would not do anything to call it back?"

"I am sure you must have suffered about Ida," Bridget said; "but pain and grief do pass, at least, if we meet them in the right way. I quite expect you will come out of this trouble, and be much happier than you ever were before."

"That lies in your hands. I know precisely what you are thinking as I speak—that it is very cool and impertinent of me to dare to say what I must say. I have learned by my own folly and infatuation a bitter lesson, and I have learned too late. But I love you with something far deeper and stronger than the brotherly or cousinly affection which has always subsisted between us. I will wait for an answer, Bridget. I know all I deserve, and all any less noble-hearted woman than yourself would say to me—but at least I am

honest now, and will not beat about the bush any longer. I ask you if it is possible to forgive and forget the past, to come to me at last, and be the joy and good influence of my life?"

Bridget walked on under the budding trees in silence, a silence which Bernard thought she would never break.

"Do give me one word, Bride," he said at last. "You cannot think, you can never know, what I have suffered for the last few months. Won't you give me one word? won't you say that I may hope?"

"Bernard, I cannot say so; it is far better now that we should remain as friends, and think of nothing more. It would not be for your happiness, I know, nor——"

"Nor yours, I suppose you were going to say. I know whom I have to thank for this, and I shall remember it. What right has he to interfere?"

The colour came into Bridget's face, but she turned it full upon Bernard:

"I am speaking simply on my own responsibility, and you have no right to question it. Please do not let us spoil this bright happy Easter Day with hard or unkind words. Whenever you want me as a friend I shall be ready to do anything for you, as I have been for so many years. I cannot say any more."

"There is one question I should like to ask, Bridget. If that wretched delusion had not intervened—if I had known what was for my own good

sooner—would you have given me a different answer? Tell me this much, and I will trouble you no more."

Bridget's native truthfulness asserted itself; and yet she hardly liked to admit what, from all the pain and suffering Bernard had caused her, she knew to be true.

"The past is past, Bernard, beyond all recall; is it wise to speak of what might have been? Everything is changed; let us accept the change, and do our best. You have so many powers and gifts, you are sure to succeed; and I am certain it is better to look forward bravely, and not backward sadly and despondingly."

"I understand," Bernard said; and the fire in his dark grey eyes died out, and the curves round his mouth softened. "I understand. Fool that I was to lose you, but I feel I *have* lost you, and I deserve it."

They were in sight of the lawn before the Hall now, where the family group were scattered.

"Here they come, at last! why, Bridget, we thought you were lost!" Maude exclaimed, as she advanced towards her sister-in-law. One glance at her face and Bernard's and she guessed that something had happened.

"They have made it all right, I hope," Maude said to herself, "but they don't look very happy." Then, as they all went into the pretty morning room together, which was aglow with the western sunshine, the conversation became general, and amidst the talk about foreign cities and pictures

and churches, Bridget felt that she might be silent.

She was standing apart from the rest, with her eyes looking dreamily into the garden, when she became suddenly conscious that Mr. Miles was looking at her—"as if she were a fossil or a new specimen," as she had said merrily after their first meeting in that very room, now nearly a year before.

Nothing connected with Bridget ever escaped the Vicar's keen observation, and he was not slow to read in Bernard's face—whom Lady Julia had fastened upon—that something was wrong. It struck him forcibly, how handsome Bernard was—how well suited he looked to Bridget in every way; and yet he felt he had been perhaps the cause of the trouble she had sometimes spoken of to him.

He was leaning back in one of the capacious chairs, his empty teacup in his hand, as Bride caught his long, scrutinising glance. She went forward involuntarily, and took his cup, saying with an attempt at a smile:

"We must still wait on you as an invalid, you know."

"I am not to be an invalid any longer, or I shall be irrecoverably spoiled. Sit down by me: there is a nice low chair for you."

Bridget obeyed, and Bernard saw it all. Breaking off abruptly in a discussion with Lady Julia about some fresco in the Pitti Palace, he

disappeared through the window, which opened on the lawn.

"Bernard does not look well," said the Squire, in his hearty, sonorous voice. "A pity a young fellow like that should take up business in silk mills, and all for that little girl who played him false. Why, the whole story was being talked of in the English society at Florence last autumn. She treated him shamefully; but herself worse. She has caught a scapegrace, if ever there was one. Why, Bride, you are the person to console Bernard, and cheer his spirits."

"My dear Gabriel," interposed Madame, as she saw the painful flush on Bridget's cheek, "have you heard the good news about Money's Corner? Do sit down by Mr. Miles, and let him tell you how he has got those wretched hovels cleared away, and has the plan for quite a little colony there of new cottages."

"All right, Madame; but though you may pull down the hovels, you can't alter the vagrant lot that swarm there. They go on from bad to worse."

"No, I hope not," Mr. Miles said. "Rushton, the very worst of the whole set, was at church to-day, dressed in respectable clothes, and he has pulled down his miserable tenement with his own hands."

"What on earth did he do that for?" asked the Squire.

"Because he knew it would please me, I believe; and that it was right."

"Don't you know the story of the shipwreck, and that dreadful man knocking my brother-in-law down, Mr. Rochemont? if not, I must tell it to you at once," Lady Julia said, and then she proceeded to rehearse with much emphasis and descriptive power; and thus attention was diverted from poor Bridget and Bernard Wentworth.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

'And we have seen on many a loved one's face
This rapture at the goal,
This joy in death, this last and sweetest grace
Of the departing soul.

'These, too, had travelled by a weary road,
And when the end drew nigh,
They saw the glorious city, God's abode,
Smile in the eastern sky.

-And at this vision, heavenly and fair,
And pure without alloy,
This infinite answer to a life-long prayer,
They die at last of joy.'

Death at the Goal.—B. M.

ALL that bright Easter-day Ria had been lying on a sofa in the bedroom she now seldom left, looking out on the line of blue sea which bound-

ed the view from the front windows of the Cottage, with longing wistful eyes. She was no more restless and excitable, but passive and languid.

Tiero was with her every day, but she left all the playing to him now—she did not often handle her own violin, as she had scarcely strength to lift it or draw the bow across the strings. A strange and subtle sympathy bound the blind boy to her, and he would often feel for her little burning hand, and press it to his lips reverently and gently, when he could not speak.

Little Nina, in her radiant health and ever-increasing beauty, was brought into her mother's room this afternoon by Katherine, who had installed herself head-nurse, and was faithfully devoted to "poor Master Anthony's wife."

"Here she is ; the young ladies from the Hall brought her back, ma'am ; and I was to tell you she had behaved beautifully at church."

"Sweet madre !" murmured little Nina, laying her head upon her mother's breast in the old caressing manner, "Nina loves madre."

Ria did not spring up as once she would have done when the child came in ; but she smiled faintly, and then turned her eyes once more to the window.

"Look, my own ! there is a ship with such white sails—like a dove ! Does my Nina see it ? Perhaps padre—father is coming across the sea in a ship to see his Nina very soon."

"And to see madre ?" the child said quickly.

"Yes, if——"

"Now," interrupted Katherine, "I am going to get your tea; you shall have it with mamma to-day, if you are very good. But let me take off this lovely new pelisse and hat. Why, I declare the pelisse and the ribbon on your hat match the colour of your eyes."

When the small garments were put away, Katherine left the room to get the tea, and Nina, instead of fidgeting about, returned to her position on the sofa by her mother.

Ria had had visits of comfort that day from Blake and Madame and Mr. Miles. All these she had wanted much to see; and she was now contented, except for the one yearning for her husband, which could never be silenced or satisfied. No word ever came from Anthony, and letters of inquiry addressed to the place from which he had written on first going out were unanswered. There must have been some cause for this silence; for, whatever had been Anthony's sins, he had loved Ria tenderly, and had won from her the most entire devotion.

"Does madre want papa?" Nina said presently, stroking her mother's thin face, and playing with a lock of the lovely hair which had escaped from the net Ria generally wore. "Does she?"

"Yes, my love; but, Nina—if I am not here when father comes, will my darling be very sweet to him? Thou art nearly four years old, and can understand what I say. And I want thee to love thy Father in heaven too, Nina; and listen to

good Uncle Blake when he tells thee of Jesus, who died for Nina and madre and all ! I wish I had loved Him sooner ; but He is so kind. He is going to make thy mother happy, and forgive everything."

The child but dimly grasped her mother's meaning, for there was something in her face and voice which struck even her baby heart with a sort of fear, and she only nestled closer and lay very still. When Katherine returned, Ria's eyes were closed, and thinking sleep would do her more good than tea, she put the tray down, and lifting Nina gently from the sofa, took her from the room.

When Bridget and her mother and Blake came home, Bridget's first question was about Ria.

"She had a sharp touch of the pain soon after Mr. Blake left, before church. She is asleep now, and looks better ; but, Miss Rochement, I don't think the end is very far off."

"Dr. Wright and Mr. Earle do not say so or think so," said Bride ; "still, I wish Mr. Earle were nearer. I will send for him if she is really worse. Let us go up, Blake, and see her ; -I ought not to have left her so long."

"What is that about Ria ?" Mrs. Rochemont asked. "She has seen too many people to-day ; pray do not excite her, Blake, my dear. I think Madame was much too long in the room, and then Mr. Miles came. I never stay more than five minutes. What a charming woman Lady Julia is, Bridget ; she has such a delightful voice !"

But Bridget was not in the humour to discuss Lady Julia Miles's perfections, and throwing off her bonnet and jacket she went with Blake to Ria's room.

The brother and sister stood looking down on the sleeping form before them, silently and sadly. Ria lay just as Katherine had left her. Her hands were in the position into which they had fallen when the child was lifted from her arms. The long tresses of hair shadowed her little thin throat, and the dark mass threw the outline of her face in strong relief. There was scarcely any colour in Ria's lips, but a little feverish spot of crimson burned on either cheek: the long lashes lay upon them, and her oval brow was calm and untroubled.

"I think I shall go into Rolleston, and ask Earle to come and see her; she is worse, I am sure," Blake said.

"Shall I send Hickey?" Bridget asked in a low voice.

"No, I will go myself."

Bridget was now left alone with Ria; and when Katherine came to summon her to the evening meal, she said she did not wish to leave her again.

"Ought we to wake her, do you think?" Katherine asked, "and give her some wine, or beef-tea?"

"I don't know, but I think not. Sleep may do her good. We must wait till Mr. Earle comes."

Then suddenly Bridget's voice failed, and her tears came streaming down

"Don't fret, Miss Bride; she will be a deal better off. She used to say we did not want her here, poor lamb! and no more we did at first, but now——"

Katherine's voice faltered.

"But I have been so unkind to her, so hard, so unloving. Oh, Katherine, I shall never forgive myself!"

"Hush, now, dear Miss Bride; it was only natural you should feel as you did; and you have been kind enough to her lately. I must go and look after that precious child; for the mistress lets her do what she likes in her room."

Bridget was left alone with the sleeper, and though the breathing came softly and regularly, she saw there was a pallor on the still face, showing the slumber was not the renovating sleep of returning health, but the exhaustion of profound weakness.

The shadows across the lawn lengthened, the sun had nearly gone down behind the woods, the blue light faded from the sea, and the "white ship" had passed to her haven long ago. The birds were singing their evensong, and now and then the distant lowing of the cattle in Mr. Day's home-meadow was borne upon the breath of the soft air. All the little emerald leaves were whispering to each other that new-born life was sweet, and the brown heap of those which had preceded them, dry and withered, crackled beneath Blake's

feet as he took the short cut through the plantation to Rollestone. Mr. Earle was not at home; he had been called to Mrs. Dacre at Longhope Vicarage, where a child was lying dangerously ill. The servant promised to send him as soon as he returned.

Blake half instinctively turned towards the Hall in his anxiety, and was shown into the sitting-room, where a small bright fire was throwing a ruddy glow on Claire's golden hair as she sat on a low chair with a book on her knees.

A pretty picture for any eyes to dwell on, but more especially for Blake's. The interdict laid upon these two had not been formally repealed, but each felt it was an understood thing that they belonged to one another, and waiting was easier to bear than hopeless separation.

"I came to tell you I have been to Rollestone for Mr. Earle. We think Ria is worse. Can I see Madame?"

"Oh, yes!" Claire said, springing towards the door.

"Wait one moment. It is so nice to see you again. Sometimes I say to myself, is it possible you can care for me?"

Claire's sweet clear eyes sought his. "Possible? ah, Blake! do not laugh at me! If only I am good enough, if only I shall help you enough in your work—but let me call mother," she said, disengaging herself from his arms. "She will know what is best to do."

Madame came at once, and the Squire with her.

"Better send a man on horseback into Rendlesham; or wait, would you like Wright from Wycheester? I will send the dog-cart or the brougham, and they can bring Wright back. What does Ambrose think?"

"He knows nothing about it, and perhaps Bride and I are unnecessarily alarmed; but I do not think Ria's sleep a natural one."

"Earle may turn up soon; but we had better make sure. Write a note, Madame, in Cousin Anna's name, and I will send for Wright: or perhaps Henderson from Rendlesham would come quicker. He is a clever man."

So it was settled; and Blake, whose movements were never very decided, thanked the Squire and departed. The twilight was deepening now, and through the shadows of the drive down to the Cottage it was difficult to see many yards before him: but the figure of a man on the raised bank to the right caught Blake's attention. He stopped, and said:

"Who is there?"

"Blake! it is I, Anthony."

Blake was too much astonished to speak at first.

"Anthony! And why have you not written for all these months?"

"I left San Francisco in hopes of getting into a better situation. Then I have been ill. I nearly

died of fever, and I am come back again an out-cast. How is my wife, and my little Nina?"

Blake's kind heart felt deep compassion for his brother, who, when they had come out of the shade of the trees into the open ground before the Cottage, he saw was emaciated and miserable in appearance. Scarcely a trace of the handsome young man of past years was left.

"Anthony, why did you hide here? Why have you not come straight to the Cottage? How long have you been standing about here?" For as Blake put his arm within his brother's, he felt he was shivering so that he could hardly stand.

"Why did I not come straight to the Cottage? Because I know I shall not be welcome, except to my darling Ria; she will never turn from me. Blake! tell me, did Bridget ever let her know what made me an exile from my father's house?"

"I think not, but I am not sure. Anthony, my poor fellow, I am afraid there is sad news waiting for you; but come in, and let me get you some wine: you are ill, I am sure."

And now quick steps were heard approaching. Ambrose and Maude were coming to learn the latest news of Ria.

Ambrose drew back suddenly when he saw Blake and his companion.

"Who have you got there, Blake? One of your poor friends from Wychester? Who is it?"

Katherine, who had been looking out for Blake's return, now opened the door. The light

of the lamp hanging in the small entrance behind her fell upon Anthony's pale grief-stricken face.

"Oh!" said Maude, in her gentle sympathetic voice, "how ill the poor man looks! can't you give him something, Blake?"

"Go into the drawing-room to my mother, dear Maude; this is our poor brother Anthony. Go in, darling, but do not tell my mother yet."

Maude obeyed; and then the three brothers, who had spent their childhood and boyhood together, and had had many a ramble on the heath and through the woods, met after long years of separation; and everything but the strong tie of natural affection and brotherhood was forgotten. Both Blake and Ambrose supported Anthony into the house; and Katherine, saying, "Don't let Mrs. Rochemont know yet," led the way to the comfortable room where she kept all her stores and reigned supreme.

"There, there, Master Anthony," the old servant said, who had carried him in her arms many a time as she had carried his little Nina that day, "take heart, she may yet live."

Blake gave Katherine a warning sign, but Anthony caught the words. "Is she dying—my wife? Oh, let me go to her at once!"

"Not till you are a bit warmed and cheered up. Think how frightened she would be if you came upon her unawares, like a ghost. She can't bear any sort of surprise."

Anthony seemed too weak to resist; and he was content to lie before the bright fire and drink

the wine offered him by his brothers, as they stood near him. The contrast was indeed great—Ambrose in all the prime and freshness of his young manhood, Blake in his ethereal, almost feminine beauty; while before them lay the wreck of one, who by sin and misdoing had brought so much trouble into the family from which the head was now taken.

After two or three minutes, Blake, who turned to God in all trouble as instinctively as a child to his loving father, knelt down and prayed for help and comfort for his brother, and for forgiveness and peace. When Blake prayed, the presence of God seemed always to be realised by the most indifferent. Ambrose covered his face with his hands, and the tears coursed down Katherine's cheeks.

When Blake ceased, there was a minute's silence, broken by a cry which rang through the little cottage, and was repeated again and again:

"Anton! Anton!"

"That is Ria calling me!" he exclaimed; and struggling to his feet, he said helplessly, "Show me the way to her; will no one show me the way?"

Bridget had kept her watch for two or three hours. Now and then Katherine and her mother had come in; but nothing seemed to awaken the sleeper, lying so calm and quiet on the sofa by the window.

Once Bridget tried to rouse her to take some nourishment, but she did not succeed; for though

Ria began to murmur and talk, her eyes were still closed, and the hands lying passive as before. Her wandering was like herself. She spoke of music, and songs, and flowers, and the blue sky. Then she would try to murmur the air of some familiar strain; and once Bridget caught the words, "Wait—wait—patiently for him." Then suddenly, as the darkness deepened—for the low-burning lamp Katherine had placed in a corner of the room did scarcely more than show the outline of Ria's face—she started, and with a wild cry of "Anton! Anton!" raised herself on the sofa, saying:

"He is here; I hear him. I know he is here;" and again the cry rang through the cottage, "Anton! Anton!"

Bridget thought this was only the wandering of delirium, and putting her arms round Ria as she sat up, said:

"Hush! dear Ria, hush!"

But Ria's dark eyes gazed earnestly at the door, and when it opened she exclaimed again, "Anton! Anton!"

To Bridget's amazement, a tall man came feebly in, and, as he threw himself on his knees by the sofa, his wife's outstretched arms were folded round Anthony's neck.

"Ah, Anton, my love!" she murmured. "Ah, but it is sweet now!"

Every one felt this meeting between the husband and wife too sacred to disturb by any word; and Bridget, Ambrose, and Blake stood a little

apart while Mrs. Rochemont and Maude were behind.

"There is nothing left to wish for now," Ria whispered, as Anthony laid her back upon the pillows. "I have been dreaming of thee all night. There is only one thing I want to ask. Will you tell me the truth—quite the truth?"

"Yes, my sweet one," Anthony said, in a low hoarse voice.

"Did you ever do anything very wrong, that they all call you 'Poor Anthony,' and never, never wish to see you come home?"

Bridget who was standing near, heard the answer, wrung at last from the very depths of her brother's shame and remorse.

"Yes, my love, I did something very wrong. I tried to get money from my father unlawfully. They are all quite right. I brought them much misery, disgrace, and trouble. Oh, Ria, my darling, can you still love me and forgive me?"

"Love thee? Only love thee more than ever," was the answer, with all the strength of her ebbing life thrown into the words, now clearly heard by every one. "More than ever, my poor Anton! I know thou wilt be always good now, and love God, and be sorry for thy sin; yes."

And then she caressed the bowed head which had sunk in the bitterness of remorse on her breast, and murmured again and again, "Love thee? Ah, yes, far more than ever!"

And so the prodigal came to his father's house, after long years of banishment; and no

punishment could have been greater than that which met him there, when, constrained by her loving earnestness, he confessed his sin to his dying wife.

For she was dying; though the presence of her husband fanned the flickering flame a little, and when Dr. Wright and Mr. Earle arrived about midnight she had rallied. At her request, they brought Nina from her bed in Katherine's room, and laid her down on the sofa, and Ria said:

"See, dearest, how lovely she is! You will teach her to be good, Anthony?"

Then she called Bridget, and said, "You have been very good to me. Be good to Antony now. Forgive him, Bride; he is so sorry."

Bridget bent down over her brother, and, kissing his forehead, said: "We will all love each other now, for your sake, Ria. I have been hard and unforgiving, as Anthony knows. I am very sorry; he must forgive me."

And then the brother and sister exchanged their first kiss after many sad years of estrangement and sorrow.

A severe attack of the pain and spasm at the heart came on early the next morning, and then another day of spring loveliness followed. Ria slept as she had done the day before, and talked without being really conscious: except that, if Anthony moved, or relaxed his hold of her hand she would start, and call his name. Mr. Miles and Blake were with her several times, and prayed

by her, but she scarcely gave any sign of understanding what was said.

It went on thus for several days. Bernard Wentworth roamed restlessly about the woods and moorland so familiar to him in times past, and felt angry and dissatisfied with the whole world, with himself most of all. The Squire had asked him to take up his quarters at the Hall, as the Cottage was full to overflowing; and here the bright young sisters were always glad to see him. Sometimes he took refuge in the High Bank House and sat with Maude in her pretty, tasteful sitting-room over the quaint old porch. He told himself no one wanted him now, and that he stood outside the sorrow which was filling all hearts at the Cottage; and yet he could not summon courage to go away.

The person he wished to avoid was Mr. Miles, and he would take a long round on his way to the Hall to avoid passing the Vicarage. One day, however—the Wednesday in this sad Easter week—he was sitting woodily with a book in his hand, in the sitting-room at the Hall, when Mr. Miles was announced. Bernard started, and then, instantly recovering his self-possession, he drew himself up to his full height, and said:

“I am afraid every one is out.”

“I came to see *you*,” said Mr. Miles in reply.

“You are very good,” Bernard said haughtily.

“Have you heard of Anthony’s wife this afternoon?”

“I have just seen her,” Mr. Miles said. “There

is no very great change. It is, however, evident that she cannot live many days. She is nursed with the utmost devotion by Miss Rochemont, who is equal to anything, and has not only the will but the power to be an excellent nurse."

Bernard's face instantly changed from its cold reserved expression to an angry one.

"My cousin scarcely wants any one's imprimatur; or rather, those who have known what she is for a lifetime hardly need such from comparative strangers."

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Miles said: "I can easily believe that those who have known her longest *ought* to value her most."

There was a scarcely perceptible emphasis laid on "ought," and Bernard winced.

Then there was an uncomfortable silence, and both men rose almost simultaneously from their chairs. In Bernard's heart there were angry and resentful feelings against Mr. Miles, while the Vicar was full of sympathy and kindness towards him.

"Will you walk up to the Vicarage with me," Mr. Miles said, "as you are alone here? I have several new inhabitants in my little aquarium since you last saw it."

"Thanks," replied Bernard coldly; "I have been walking about all the morning, and feel lazy."

"Very well," Mr. Miles rejoined, and held out his hand. Bernard took it, but gave the friendly pressure no return.

"I am going away from East Repton soon," Mr. Miles said. "I cannot leave our friends at the Cottage in their sorrow; but I shall take three months' rest, as I am a good deal shaken by my illness. I am no longer young; and, when a man nears fifty, his powers of rallying are not what yours would be, for instance. I hope I shall see you leave the Hall. If I do not, I most sincerely wish you all success and prosperity in every way, and the secret of it."

Bernard's haughty manner relaxed a little. There was something so irresistible in the sincerity of Mr. Miles. He instinctively felt he was a man to be trusted, and his kindly words made him rather ashamed of his suspicions and doubts.

"Success and prosperity seem a long way from me," he answered; "and I have myself to thank for my present position, which is not an enviable one. I dare say you know nothing about the misery of looking back and feeling that, if you could alter the irrevocable past, you would give years of life to do so."

"We must all look back on the past with regret," Mr. Miles said: "the much that might have been done, and the much that is left undone; but it is better to say, in the words of that hymn among all hymns to our Lord—

"Remember not past years,"

and to pray to be led onward by the kindly Light which can make brightness in dark places."

And now, like a flock of white birds in their

light spring dresses, the five young sisters were seen coming across the lawn from the village, Madame in their midst in all her sweet and gracious autumnal beauty.

The young voices were glad and joyous. Little Christine ran forward to Mr. Miles: for, like all children, she recognised a friend in him, and exclaimed:

"We have been to see such lots of people. They all say the same thing to me— 'How you be grown, Miss Christine!'"

"It is so nice to be at home again," Janet said; "and the weather is so beautiful, if only we did not feel so sad about poor Ria at the Cottage."

"I suppose it would not do for us to have the child here altogether, but we should like it very much," Margaret said.

"O, no! Blake told me when there was any interval of consciousness, Ria always asked for Nina."

This quoting of Blake's opinion brought the colour to Claire's pretty face, and she turned away to avoid Bernard's scrutiny.

Madame walked to the gate with Mr. Miles, and as they parted she said:

"I hear from my people all you have been to them in our absence, and dear Bridget's praises too are in every mouth. How can I thank you enough for all you have done, especially with those from whom I confess I had a cowardly shrinking—the Arabs at Money's Corner? You have really

reached both ends of the little community most successfully, from Ned Rushton to Mr. Day. I hear nothing but that 'the Parson is the right sort', and indeed he is."

Mr. Miles did not say much in return. Madame was struck with the absence of his old brightness and cheerfulness, and said :

"You will, I trust, take a long rest soon. You are not strong by any means. Lady Julia told me yesterday that she was most anxious you should get away."

"I cannot leave home while our poor friends are watching by that sick-bed. It may, I think, go on for some days yet."

"Perhaps it may," Madame said. "It is a most touching story, and we can but hope that poor Anthony Rochemont will now learn the lesson which everything hitherto has failed to teach him. I was there this morning, and shall go again after dinner this evening. I am a little anxious about Bridget. She has had no proper rest since Sunday, and never leaves Ria. Bridget's is a beautiful character, and of late, since her religious life has been quickened, how doubly attractive she is ! She has gone through so much for the last five or six years ; few girls of her age would have shown the heroism and self-control she has done ; and now the loving, womanly tenderness, which perhaps was missed in her once, has brought out the whole picture with such softness and sweetness."

Madame was not, as I said before, skilled in

the ethics of love and life : or she would not have turned back to the Hall disappointed with Mr. Miles that he had not a word to say in praise of Bridget, not a word of appreciation of all her labours in the parish ; but that, with a quickly uttered "good-bye," he had abruptly walked away from the gate with his long strides, without endorsing what she had said of her cousin. And yet in Mr. Miles' heart there was a far fuller response than Madame or any one else had guessed.

From the day when in her frank simple way Bridget had told him of her unsatisfied longing and trouble, his heart had yearned to bring her to the Well spring of happiness and peace. His personal and individual love for her had grown up side by side with this care for her best interests, and he was too honest not to have acknowledged it to himself long ago. Now, with all the chivalrous unselfishness of his nature, he determined to give her up to Bernard ; or, at any rate, to leave her without a word which might show that he wished the tie between them to be other than that of the friendship, which to her he knew had been pleasant—but into which no thought of love, he felt sure, had ever entered, as far as she was concerned.

Was it likely, he asked himself, that he could be preferred before Bernard, who, even though he had failed in his allegiance for a year, had reaped a bitter harvest, and had come back sad and disappointed to try to make amends, and to lay

perhaps a double portion of love at Bridget's feet.

Was it not like a woman after Bridget's type to forgive, and love even more, because she had to forgive? He knew it was. And what was he, past his prime, with all his college habits and ways clinging to him, with his absent, preoccupied manner—what was he, when compared with that fine man, in the glory of his young manhood, lithe and supple of limb, with a bearing that was dignified and princely?

Had not Lady Julia declared that she had seldom seen any one to compare with Mr. Wentworth? Had not she said, in that careless way which often drives a spear into an open wound, "that Mr. Wentworth and Bridget looked as if they ought to belong to each other, and she was sure that Mr. Wentworth was deeply in love, though she did not feel equally sure about Miss Rochemont"?

Mr. Miles did not guess that Lady Julia spoke with intention, and drew her own inferences from the indifferent manner in which her brother-in-law had responded to her remark. But the shaft had pierced deeply, nevertheless, and had done much to bring the Vicar to the point at which we now find him.

We may be sure that he took higher and better counsel than any earthly friend could give him in this matter. Though with less outward demonstration, Mr. Miles turned to his Master in all difficulties as confidently and humbly as Blake

did. It might be said truly of him that *laborare est orare*; for he lived in continual communion with the God whom he loved, and saw His hand in the softening of Ned Rushton's rugged heart, and the happiness which Bridget's help and friendship had given him.

Now as he walked along the road to the Vicarage, with the birds singing over head, his resolution was taken—and he prayed that he might be helped to keep it—to say no word, to make no sign to Bridget Rochemont of what was in his heart, and to wait. He would leave her free, and if Bernard chose to try, he might yet win her. Anyway, his path was plain—he would wait. And as this conclusion was arrived at, the Vicar shook himself like a man awaking from a dream, and formed the heroic resolve to put self-interest aside, and give up the woman he loved to another, if so it must be.

The Vicarage had been restored to its old quiet routine. Lady Julia and the great Surcombe and Mrs. Tilney were gone. The little dinners in the ante-room were over; and the small table was again set at the far end of the library, where Mrs. Bond once more presided at the evening meal.

As Mr. Miles went round to the back of the house he met Rushton, his spade over his shoulder and his basket in his hand, with a little boy following close at his heels.

“Your eldest boy, Rushton?”

"Yes, your honour. We be walking off to Rollestone to-night. Jack has been weeding a bit in the garden. I've got a good way with the enclosure to-day, if you'd turn and look."

Mr. Miles did turn and look, and saw that Rushton had done the work of two ordinary men.

"This is a fine day's work, Rushton," he said. "You ought to have an extra shilling or two added to your wages."

"No, sir, I am obliged to you," said Rushton, half offended. "It's not pay I ever wants from you."

"I know it, my good fellow; but labour is labour. Well, Jack here will carry this to his mother, I daresay;" and Jack's dirty little paw closed over half-a-crown.

Jack's manners were not remarkable for polish, and he only gave a low chuckle by way of thanks.

"Take care of him, Rushton," Mr. Miles said. "Don't let him see the inside of a public-house as you go to and from Rollestone, and don't let him hear bad words."

"His mother is a good soul, and takes a sight of trouble with him, sir."

"That's right. There's nothing in the world, Rushton, like a good mother, and a good wife," he added. "God's two best gifts to us poor men, who need a hand to lead, not to pull us."

"Ay, ay, sir; but," and Rushton took off his furry cap and rubbed his forehead, "it ain't very easy for the like of me to keep straight, led or

not led. Why, I got into an awful raging temper last night because one of the fellows down Rolleston way fell to jeering and scoffing and scorning me, and saying I was a big hypocrite, and only made up to you, sir, to get a dwelling and daily bread for my children. I gave him a black eye afore I could get breath, and I was right sorry afterwards."

"Well," Mr. Miles said, "I hope you told the man so. Did you?"

"Well, no, sir. I could not go and humble myself like that to him."

"Do it, then, this evening, if you meet him; for a blow from your hand is no joke. And as to being called a hypocrite——"

"Don't 'ee, sir, now don't 'ee," said Rushton. "I am down in the dust about that as it is, every time I see you. Don't go and reckon it up again."

"My good fellow," said Mr. Miles, laughing, "I was not thinking of myself when I spoke. I remember now you did once call me a hypocrite, and I know by experience the weight of your hand is not light; but Rushton, I know too"—as Rushton's face worked convulsively—"I know too how well it can work for me, and that you and I are determined, by God's help, to work shoulder to shoulder in this neighbourhood for Him. You must ask Him for power to restrain your temper when it rises—to pull it in, you know, as you pull a wild horse. Here, shake hands, Rushton. Don't be down-hearted, my good fellow. God bless you!"

The Vicar felt his hand wrung by the great, horny, rough palm Rushton held out, and so they parted, the Vicar saying in a louder voice, as Rushton moved away:

"And mind you tell the man you are sorry about his black eye. Good-night."

CHAPTER XII.

A LAST LOOK.

"On, then! the things behind forget,
And boldly reach to those before;
So shall thy life be golden yet,
With all the joy thou hop'st, and more.

"Golden because thy love will grow,
Such as the noblest heart may prize,
And strong to meet with answ'ring glow,
The love that speaks from faithful eyes.

"Sweet love, sweet life, which thus absides,
Still chastened by its own deep awe,
And mid all changes changeless guides
Its course by Love's unchanging law."

ARS AMANDI.

THE dew was yet upon the grass, and the sun scarcely risen the next morning, when the Vicar went slowly down the drive to the Cottage. There was no need to hasten, for the little note he held in his hand contained only these words:

"She is at rest—just at daybreak this morning—
B. R."

When Mr. Miles reached the Cottage the door stood open, and he went in. Everything within was hushed and still, while without the thrushes and blackbirds were singing their matins till the woods echoed with the sound, and all the wakening life of the spring-time was to be heard on every side. Mr. Miles paused a moment, and then turned into the drawing-room, which was vacant. He posted on instinctively to the little study, and there, sitting at a table, was Bridget. Her face was very pale, and dark lines round her eyes told him how heavy the watching had been.

"I am so glad you are come," she said.

"I wish I had been here at the time; why did you not send for me?"

"Because I did not think the end was so near. I should like to tell you all about it, if you will sit down. Blake has taken Anthony to his room, and is sitting with him. Mother is asleep, and so is poor little Nina. Only Blake and I were with Ria, for Katherine went to bed last night. She seemed stronger, and spoke to us all in her natural voice—not in that dreamy far-away tone of the last few days. There was a hymn, one of Blake's hymns, which she made him say over and over again :

"How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear—"

you know the rest. Well, last night she kept repeating the last verse at intervals:

“And may the music of Thy Name
Refresh my soul in death.”

I shall never forget her voice, as once she actually sang that last verse to no tune ever heard on earth. She must be singing it now where she is. But, oh! this mystery of death,” Bridget said suddenly, with passionate eagerness. “One does long to know all that that *where* implies. Do you know, I dread it. The stopping of everything that is seen, and the going to the unseen, it is all so dark and undefined.”

“Do not dwell on thoughts like that,” Mr. Miles said. “He who can light us through the darkness of life, will surely be sufficient for death.”

“The darkness of life,” Bridget repeated.

“Yes; do you not know Blanco White’s sonnet to ‘Night’? It is a sonnet not to be surpassed in the English language. I will repeat it to you if you will lie back in that easy-chair and rest a little.”

“But I have so many letters to write, and there is so much to think of. Ambrose was obliged to go to London on bank business on Monday, and there is nobody but me to arrange everything. Blake—poor dear Blake—cannot be decided and practical, and Bernard Wentworth never comes near us.”

“I will consult the Squire, and I will do all

you wish ; but now, let me beg you to be quiet. You are over-wrought, and want sleep ; lie back in that chair, and let me cover you with this shawl."

He put a cushion at her head, and she obeyed him as if she were a child.

"I have not told you all," she said. After that swan song Ria seemed to sleep, and Anthony sat by her while I lay down on the sofa. I think I went to sleep too, for I came back to the reality of what was passing by hearing Ria talking. She was telling Anthony she had had a beautiful dream, and had been singing to a great many people, just as she used to do ; and then she saw her father and mother, and a poor lady who was once touched by her voice, all in white, and that she thought the dear old times were come back. Then she said :

"'Anton, why do you cry ? I am so happy. Jesus has asked me to come to Him, and I have come, and you and little Nina will come too, Anton !'

"As she called him then, I sprang up, for there was a sound in her voice as if startled and bewildered. The dawn was coming in through the Venetian blind, and she turned her eyes toward it.

"'Let me see—let me see,' she said eagerly. 'I hear the music, but I can't see.' Anthony raised her in his arms, and I went to call Blake and Katherine. When I came back I saw it was death. Blake knelt down and prayed, and I knelt by him.

My father died at daybreak, two years ago next May. It was just such a morning as this, and the same planet was hanging in the sky, opposite the window, as I knelt by his bed. It was very strange, everything was so like, and I thought of his last words—' *My poor Anthony! my poor Anthony!*' I did so wonder if he was near us then. I think he must have been. Ria seemed to gaze out on that beautiful sky and shining star, as if she was looking at the way she was going. Then there came a little moan and a sigh, and then her head fell upon poor Anthony's shoulder, and Katherine said, 'She is gone!'

"I have told you all now. We knelt down for some time in silence; I don't know how long, but till it was quite light, and then we were roused by a heavy fall. It was poor Anthony, who had fallen senseless on the floor; then I came down here and sent to you. It is nice to think that Ria quite forgave me, for she had so much to forgive. I believe she really loved me at last——"

"I am sure she did!" Mr. Miles said fervently.

"Do you remember the day when I told you about Ria's coming and said so many hard and bitter things, and you said, 'You may find her an angel unawares'? That was a bad time for me in every way. Sometimes I have thought I should like to tell you all about it, and then I have thought again it had better rest. Now say those verses about Death."

"About Life, rather," said Mr. Miles. "I will repeat the lines on one condition—that you will lie quietly where you are, and trust me with all the letters and arrangements. I will go up to the Hall when I leave you, and arrange everything with the Squire."

"You had better tell Bernard, too," Bridget said quickly. "Say I asked you to tell him, and I hope he will stay till the funeral is over."

Mr. Miles promised to do all she asked; and then, in his low-pitched but singularly musical voice, he repeated:

"Mysterious Night! when our first parent knew
Thee by report Divine, and heard thy name,
Did he not tremble for this goodly frame,
This glorious canopy of light and blue?
But, through a curtain of translucent dew,
Bathed in the hues of the fast setting flame,
Hesperus with the host of heaven came:
And lo! Creation broadened to man's view.
Who could have guessed such darkness lay concealed
Within thy beams, O sun? or who divined,
When bud, and flower, and insect lay revealed,
Thou to such countless worlds hadst made us blind?
Why should we then shun Death with anxious strife?
If *Light* conceals so much, wherefore not *Life*?"

"You must say it over again," Bridget said. "I do not quite take it in with one hearing."

"No," Mr. Miles answered; "I must leave you now, and with words still more full of meaning—'Christ has overcome death, and brought life and immortality to light.' Do not mistrust His

power, and be sure He will show you what is behind the veil when the right time comes. God bless you!"

He left her then, and met Katherine in the little hall. Her eyes were red with crying, and she held a tray in her hand.

"I am going to take Miss Rochemont some breakfast, sir. We shall lose her next, if we don't take care. For all she makes so little of it, she is quite worn out."

"I know it," Mr. Miles said. "Pray leave her to rest. I will see the Squire about all that is necessary."

"Thank you, sir. The dear lamb looks beautiful. Will you please to come and see her?"

Mr. Miles followed Katherine upstairs, and entered the room where Ria lay. She was still on the little bed by the window, and all her lovely hair lying about her like a cloud. The face was wonderfully sweet and calm in its expression. The light from the "life to come" shone on it.

"Yes," Mr. Miles said aloud, "He has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. Who could wish to bring her back to the mists and shadows here? She is satisfied now, and at rest."

As he left the Cottage he met Walter Day, who was led down the drive by one of his father's farm-servants.

The blind boy's quick ear caught the sound

of footsteps, and stopping, said, "Please, sir, will you tell me how the lady is this morning?"

Mr. Miles laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and said:

"She is gone from us, Walter. All her pain is over, and she is hearing the music she loved so much, in heaven."

To Mr. Miles's surprise, the blind boy made no sign or sound, but stood with his large sightless eyes turned up to the fair blue sky of morning. At last he said:

"I thought she was gone: for I could not sleep all night for thinking I heard her singing. It sounded a long way off, but I knew it was her voice; so I got up and dressed; and when Carter went to feed the cattle I listened for his steps, and made him bring me here. Take me back, Carter," he said in a sad, pathetic voice; "take me back. I don't want to go to the Cottage any more. She will sing in heaven; and I shall see her, I shall know her by her voice, and it won't be very long."

The boy turned away with an expression of grief on his face more touching than any tears or cries would have been; and the man, who was a faithful old servant of Farmer Day's, said:

"He won't be long after her, sir, bless him, and the master sees it; but his mother's heart is so bound up in him she can't see it. Come; this is our way, Master Walter," he added, turning to the farm; and the boy went with weary, slow

steps towards home, a true and loving mourner for "Anton's little Ria."

"I am going away to-morrow, Bridget," Bernard said, as they sat together in one of the old wooden summer-houses in the plantation, a week after Ria's death. "I am going away to-morrow; and before I go I must ask you once more if my case is hopeless."

"Not hopeless, by any means," she answered. "You have the world before you. You have discovered the means of increasing your fortune, and in time you will find some one who will share it with you and make you happy."

"I want no one but you to do this," Bernard said shortly. "Why will you speak like this to me? I tell you I cannot face the future without you—for so many years,"——He stopped.

"Yes Bernard, for so many years," Bridget said, "we were much to each other; but I was more dependent on you than you were on me. I was so proud of you, and felt sure you would distinguish yourself some day."

"And I did not," Bernard said bitterly. "Nothing about me is ever complete. I always just miss everything. Second so often, the second class at Oxford the type of all the rest."

"No, you must not say so. You will be successful now, I feel sure; but I should not help you. Hear me patiently, and don't be vexed with me, for I am so tired, and I hardly dare look forward to all that lies before me now."

"Let me take every burden then—share all your cares, Bridget. I ask for nothing better."

"No; it would not answer. I should always feel a sense of insecurity; and I can never feel again as I felt before—before you went to Italy. If you had treated me with confidence then, and told me everything, I might, perhaps, have felt differently now; but that year has made a gulf between us, and an attempt to bridge it over would not succeed. I know it would not."

"I believe you are too proud to take me now," Bernard said. "You naturally think, that having failed elsewhere I come to you. It is not so. That was all on the surface; all men are more or less fools about beauty, and I am no exception to the rule; and all her flatteries and pretty speeches did the rest. It was not companionship, or sympathy, or anything like it. I know it is a mercy for me that things turned out as they did."

Bridget was silent, and then, after a pause, Bernard said:

"Well, then, this must be good-bye. Before I go I want to say a word about the Vicar."

Bridget put out her hand, as if in appeal, saying, "Please don't."

"Yes, I must. I think him one of the noblest and best men that ever lived; and if once I have said anything that might seem as if I thought the reverse, I am sorry. He is also going away to-morrow, and is to dine at the Hall to-night."

Bernard hesitated.

"If I must give you up, I think I would rather

Miles had you, as the people here say he will, than any one else."

Bridget's face flushed crimson; she started to her feet and said:

"Bernard, there is not the slightest ground for the foolish gossip you may have heard here. Never has Mr. Miles said one word to me which could be construed into anything but friendship. It distresses me that you should listen to anything of the kind. He has been a true friend to me, and to every one in East Repton, but nothing more to me than to others."

And Bridget thought she was sincere when she said so. Perhaps the Vicar's good-bye, which had been spoken just before Bernard arrived that afternoon, laid to rest any doubt which might have crossed her mind; and she thought that by the time he returned to take up his duty again, the gossips of the place and neighbourhood would have found something else to occupy them.

"He bid me good-bye as if he should see me to-morrow; not in the least as if he cared whether he should ever see me again," she continued eagerly, as Bernard still lingered. "Pray, pray dismiss from your mind all such unfounded reports, and be content to leave me, as I am content to be, Bridget, only Bridget, whose friendship you may always count upon."

Bernard took both her hands in his, and looking down into her frank, clear eyes, felt that here, at least, was a woman who *was* what she seemed.

"God bless you, Bride!" he said; and, stooping, he kissed her forehead and left her.

For the next few weeks every one's thoughts and sympathies centred in the poor broken-down man who, like the ghost of his former self, wandered in the dusk of the summer evenings through the wood to the churchyard, where Ria's grave lay under the shadow of the chancel wall, and where Anthony Rochemont poured out the sorrows of his desolate heart. He seemed to refuse all comfort, and shrank especially from Bridget, who was patient and kind, though having to bear her mother's helpless and continuous wonder as to what would become of poor Anthony now. Little Nina, in all her bright beauty, seemed to afford her father but small comfort; and he longed for his wife with the longing only to be understood by those who feel that death has taken away the one, the only one, whose love was so great that no faults or shortcomings could change it—nay, rather, as Ria had said, the love would be greater because the need was greater.

As the weeks went on, Ambrose and the Squire agreed that Anthony must be roused to take some interest in life again, and do something for his living. But what and where was this to be?

"It cannot be in England," the Squire said "and yet it is a forlorn thing to send him off again, with that poor child. Still, he cannot go on living on your mother, that is very plain. A man of that age, too: it is out of the question."

The Squire "sounded" Anthony, as he called it, and declared he could make nothing of him. Then Ambrose tried: and even Madame, tender in sympathy and full of tact as she was, could draw nothing from him, but the expression of the most hopeless grief and despondency.

"He was fit for nothing," he said. "He only hoped he should not live long; no one wanted him, and no one cared what became of him."

It was very depressing to have such an inmate in the Cottage, and poor Bridget felt her position more and more trying. Her mother spoiled Nina and mourned over Anthony, while the family generally seemed to look to her to influence her brother, and effect what they could not.

It was a relief when the Trinity Ordination in Wycheater drew near, and Ambrose proposed that they should all take up their abode in the Old Bank House, and be present at the service in the cathedral when Blake was to take those solemn vows upon him, which he was prepared to do with all his heart and soul in the cause of his Master. Blake's character had deepened in a remarkable way during the yast year. He was no longer self-asserting and dogmatic, but often touchingly humble and charitable in his judgment of others: and instead of dictating his terms to the Squire, he was quite willing to accept the decree that Claire should not marry him till he had settled where to make his home. A chaplaincy to the bishop of a new colony in North America seemed to fulfil all the conditions, and it was

decided that, on his ordination, he should go out for a year as a deacon to the settlement. If his health bore the work, and he and Claire were of the same mind, he was to return home that time next year, and take his wife back with him. The climate was healthy, and the whole thing wore a different aspect to the West African Mission Station, where Blake had once vehemently declared he must work. There would be association for Claire, and she would have her work with others, and not have to go through the loneliness of many missionaries' wives in unfrequented stations. Blake's fears that he would compromise his devotion to his Master's cause by taking this course were set at rest by the opinion of the doctors, that a few months in a tropical climate would soon render him useless and unfit for any active service, while in a more healthful place he might be braced for years of real work, for which he longed.

To the surprise of the whole family, on the morning of Blake's ordination, Anthony walked into the cathedral, and knelt down apart from the rest, as if not worthy to be counted among them. No one knew of his intentions, and he did not come to the Bank House afterwards. Blake, however, found him waiting for him in the nave of the cathedral when he returned for the afternoon service. Anthony put out his hand, which Blake pressed affectionately, and said:

"I want to speak to you afterwards."

"Come home with me to the Bank," Blake

said; "they are all there and they would be glad to see you."

"No, I cannot come there," Anthony said. "It was there I parted in anger from my father."

Nor did he; but taking his brother's arm, the two young men paced up and down the Close after service, and then Antony told what was in his heart.

"Will you take me with you, Blake, to the colony? Will you be afraid to take me? I will work, and I may be of use, and I feel as if you could keep me straight."

"No, Anthony, I cannot keep you straight. God alone is sufficient for these things. But come with me, and let us be brothers indeed, vowed to do God good and loyal service."

"Thank you," Anthony said fervently. "She loved you, Blake; she would thank you if she could. If I am saved at last, and turned to God, I shall have to thank you for it. I believed in you, Blake, and that your religion was real when you sought me out and took my darling home. Oh, Blake, Blake! I would give my right hand to have her back again!"

"We must think of going to her, Anthony, and strive after her simple faith, the faith of the little child. Come home to the Bank."

But Anthony was firm in his resolution, and went to a little obscure hotel in the lower part of Wycheater, and thence took the coach back again to East Repton the next morning.

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Again it was Easter at East Repton, and there was rejoicing in the Three Homes. At the High Bank House a little daughter, long earnestly desired, had come to brighten her gentle mother's life and be the pride of her father's heart. At the Hall, Blake's bride was making all her preparations with a glad and trusting heart; and Madame, as she read Blake's letters, so chastened and subdued in their tone, so far more humble and less confident, rejoiced in Claire's happiness, and encouraged her husband to do the same. Janet, too, was to be married on the same day to a man after her father's own heart—a plain-spoken, honest country gentleman, of good means and good family, who said he could wish for nothing better than to have a daughter of the Squire to be the mistress of his house: one brought up by a mother like Madame, fitted for her duties and responsibilities, and not rendered too grand for them by modern fashion in education and habits. Mr. Willoughby was no hero of romance; but Janet was very content and happy, most earnestly and truly in love, and inclined to wonder why such a bright future should be in store for her, while a clever, brilliant girl, like her cousin Bride, should still be unmarried.

In the Cottage things were much the same. Nina was lovely, and much indulged by her grandmother; while the burden of her faults, like all other burdens, was apt to fall on Bridget. For Nina would be, like all spoiled children, *exigeante* and unruly sometimes, and then she was handed

over to Bride, "who could always manage everybody." Bride's grand weapon was to speak to Nina of her mother, and to tell her how grieved she would be if she were naughty. Tiero, too, had a good influence on the child; but the blind boy was not often at the Cottage now, and spent much of his time with his beloved violin, more dear than ever, now the sweet, gentle teacher was gone.

It was Easter Even, and Bridget had had a busy day, when, having seen little Nina safe in Katherine's hands, she set out for the churchyard with a basket of flowers for Ria's grave. As Bridget stood by the turf which covered Ria's last resting-place, a great longing for quiet and peace came over her. She was more tired than she had ever been; she was tired of the burden and heat of the day, and much of her old spirit and elasticity had died out of her. As she read the words on the white marble stone at the head of the grave, she could almost have wished her own name were there also:

"MARIA LUCIA ROCHEMONT,

THE BELOVED WIFE OF

ANTHONY DE LILLE ROCHEMONT."

—then the date, and age, twenty-six—then the words she had herself chosen: "The redeemed of the Lord shall return and come to Sion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads. And sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

"Dear Ria," she said; "dear little Ria! what

has this year been to her, and the three years to my father? Only a drop in the ocean of their happiness! while to me, and to many—to multitudes—it has been a long and weary path to travel."

The shutting of the vestry door, and the turning of a key, made her look up, and she saw Mr. Miles was coming towards her. Tears were in Bridget's eyes as they met his.

"You are not sad for her," he said; "surely not."

"No," she answered. "I was sad for myself, I think."

He did not speak; and Bridget, turning away from the grave, said:

"We have had very good news to-day. Blake speaks in his letter so hopefully of Anthony. He is very useful to him, and gets plenty of employment as a land surveyor, and other work of that kind. He speaks of Anthony as entirely changed, and we cannot be too thankful. I wonder if Ria knows? Blake will be here on the 6th of June, and the marriages are fixed for the 24th. Everything seems brightening up for the Rochemonts now."

She thought Mr. Miles unusually silent, and went on:

"I hope you like the flowers in the church. The girls from the Hall worked hard with me this morning, and many of the best flowers came from the Hall greenhouse. Good-bye," she said; "this is my way."

Bridget turned towards the drive, but Mr. Miles turned with her. I was a long time now since he had walked with her a step further than was necessary, for he had most rigidly kept the resolution he had made, and since his return to the Vicarage, some months before, Bridget had seen very little of him. He had avoided her rather than sought her; and Mrs. Dacre and the little army of gossips were baffled, and obliged to confess themselves mistaken, after all. At the little white gate leading into the plantation, Mr. Miles paused.

"Shall we take a turn here?"

"Oh yes, if you like," Bridget said readily. She was glad to return to the old pleasant intercourse, which she felt had been broken—she scarcely knew why. The easiest solution to her mind seemed to be, that all the stupid rumours of love had reached his ears, and that he had thought he would put a stop to them. Thus in the dark do we often move! So little do we know the inner mind of many with whom we are in daily contact. So wrong we are in our judgments, and full of misconceptions and groundless suspicions.

The day was still lingering in the west, and came with a faint light through the trees on one side, while on the other the Easter moon was rising above them, and keeping her calm vigil as she did on the most memorable night in the history of the world, over the grave where the Lord slept. Easter Even is always a solemn time, and Bridget was thinking of her dead as she walked

along by the Vicar's side on the soft dewy turf, where the stillness, as of the grave, was scarcely broken by the occasional rustle of a bird in the low bushes, or the gentle sigh of the wind in the tops of the fir-trees—that mysterious murmur as of far seas, which is like nothing else in creation.

“We have not had a walk together for a long time,” she said at last. “Not since you were ill, before dear Ria died. I remember so well how kind you were to me here, the day I lost little Nina. I am happier now than I was then, though sadder, if you can understand a seeming contradiction. I *feel* more as you told me I must, if I would be happy. You did me so much good then, and often since.”

“You must not talk to me like this,” he said, suddenly interrupting her; “you hardly know what you are doing.”

“I don't understand you,” she said, stopping and looking up into his face.

One look, and, even in the dim shadowy light, that was enough. She understood him at last.

It was his turn to speak now, and he spoke rapidly at first, after his fashion, but gradually he grew more calm and earnest. He told his story with the simple directness of his nature, and here, as always, his reality carried all its accustomed force with it.

“I have not said all this before, because I thought it better to be silent. I had my own reasons for silence, and I thought them good.

Anyhow, I have kept a resolution I made now nearly a year ago, that I would not stand in the way of a man younger and more worthy of you in all outward things than I am: though not more worthy if love is to be counted for a claim. Now, that is my story," he said at last. "You have been very patient, and heard me out. Will you be equally honest with me, and tell me what is in your heart? I will wait," he said. "I have waited so long. I have looked at the probability of your answer being contrary to what I wish, that I can almost promise I will bear it bravely as a man, rather as a Christian, should. But if it is possible that God is to give me this amongst other gifts, this greatest earthly one—*you*, your love—if I know myself at all, I know that it will be the crowning gift to me, the completion of my life, the great harmony to which everything will henceforth be set."

He had taken off his hat as he spoke, and stood before her, his head thrown back, his attitude and gesture not of entreaty, but rather that of a man who was making a full confession of a truth which he held dear.

And Bridget stood by him here, in the place where her childhood and girlhood had been passed; old memories thronging round her, her brave heart beating fast, her usual self-possession and control forsaking her. It had come, then, at last, and what should she say?

"Well," Mr. Miles repeated, "I will wait for your answer, another year, if so it must be."

"No," she said, in a low faltering voice, "you must not wait; only I must tell you everything." As she spoke, she drew nearer to him, and put her little cold hand in his.

He drew it within his own, and said: "Yes, tell me, as you say, all, everything, if you wish; but nothing, if you would rather keep silence."

"You must have seen, when you knew me first," Bridget said, "that some trouble was pressing on me. I had cared so very much more for my cousin, Bernard Wentworth, than I knew I did. When he engaged himself to some one at Florence, and kept it from me, I was very, very much hurt; and yet I had really no right to be hurt. I think it was the mystery and secrecy he made about it to me, after I had, as I thought, shared every thought and joy and sorrow of his for so long, that gave me the greatest pain. Well, you know how it ended; he came back, disappointed and miserable, and twice since then he has asked me to be his wife. I could not do it. I don't think it was pride held me back, or a false idea of my own dignity, or anything of that sort. I feel it would not be the same thing—it could not have been the same—as it might once have been. He is happy now, for he sees it is better as it is; and I think," Bridget continued, with something of her old bright manner, "he is finding consolation in Somersetshire. So it is all right for him——"

"For you?" Mr. Miles asked, "for you?"

"For me? oh, yes!"

"And you will come to me, Bridget?"

It was the first time she had ever known him call her by name.

"Yes," she said. "I hope——"

"You hope what?" he asked.

"That I shall not disappoint you; that I shall be all you want, do all you want."

"I am going to spoil you a little first, before we talk of doing," he said tenderly; "you have been looked to for everything by everybody for so long, and now you must look to me."

"Ah!" she said, "that will be very nice, to feel there is some one who knows best: and that I may rest, for a little while, you know, not always. You must tell Ambrose about it, and—" Bridget stopped and laughed, "and Mrs. Bond, and Lady Julia."

"Both are prepared; Julia has long ago settled about the furnishing of the large empty drawing-room at the Vicarage, with buhl cabinets and gilt and finery."

"As if we would let her," Bride said; and the use of the plural pronoun was sweet to the ear of one who had been solitary for so long. "As if we would let her. The drawing-room shall be like the library. If we furnish it at all, it shall be with the things you like."

Then they turned towards the Cottage, where the lights were twinkling in the windows, and Mr. Miles said a few more earnest, almost solemn words. God was nearer to him than ever in his new-found happiness, and he acknowledged that

this love, so long desired, like all other beautiful things, came from Him, the Fountain and Well of Love.

Bridget felt his blessing, as he left her, fill her with a sense of security and peace; and little Nina, lying in her bed in Aunt Bride's room, was awakened by a kiss.

"Madre, mamma," Nina murmured.

"No, Nina, not Madre, only Aunt Bride; she is so very, very happy to-night."

"I am so glad," Nina said, her little drowsy voice getting fainter and fainter; "and Madre is glad too, up in heaven. Madre is always glad there, always glad there."

Bridget knelt by the bed, long after the child was asleep: and then, braced and strengthened and thankful, she went down to tell her mother her news.

"Bridget, how late you are! You will wear yourself out with other people's concerns. Where have you been?"

Bridget went swiftly up to her mother's chair, and stooping, kissed her.

"Mother, I am very happy to-night. I am going to marry Mr. Miles."

Mrs. Rochemont started up.

"My dear Bridget! Well, you will be near at hand, and still able to look after little Nina and me. I shall not lose you quite. But have you well considered the disparity of age, and Mr. Miles's peculiarities? So different to—to—poor Bernard. However, I quite expect Bernard will

marry Lord Frampton's daughter, and I am very glad. Mr. Miles—well, he is an excellent man, and has plenty of means; but Bridget, I am rather sorry Mrs. Dacre and other people should be gratified. I have contradicted the report so flatly so often."

"You may confirm it now, mother," Bridget said in her quick bright manner; for she was so used to her mother's disposition, that the prominence of self in this speech did not strike her painfully. "You may confirm it now, mother, and say, what indeed is true, that I am very glad not to leave the neighbourhood, and that I am quite content to live at East Repton all my life."

"But Mr. Miles may be made a dean or bishop, Bride. He is a man of good family, and has plenty of interest. Who knows? he may be the next Dean of Wychester."

"Don't look forward to impossible deaneries, or still more impossible mitres, mother; and I am sure, of the last it may be said, in these days, uneasy lies the head that wears one. Look forward to the best and kindest son-in-law in the world, though he is a little old for *you*, I confess, and only the Vicar of East Repton."

Mrs. Rochemont never disliked an allusion to her youthful appearance, which was wonderfully youthful for her age.

"Well," she said, "your dear father would have liked Mr. Miles, Bride; perhaps thought him almost good enough for you, which is saying a great deal. There are very few women like you,

Bridget;" then Mrs. Rochemont held out her arms, and Bridget was held in a loving embrace by her mother.

When we leave a place where we have been happy, we like to leave it in sunshine. As the carriage moves away, we like to see the hillside where we have wandered, the wood where we have gathered the wild flowers and hyacinths, the river down which we have had dreamy delightful expeditions, shining in the sun. We like to bid our goodbye to the old cathedral where we have listened to, and joined in, some grand hymn of praise, with the sunshine on its towers. We like to look our last on the house where we have lived and loved and been happy, glowing in the light.

So in sunshine we will look our last at the Three Homes of the Rochemonts.

In the little room over the porch at the High Bank House, Maude sits with a baby in her arms.

A perfect picture of a young mother, with the light playing upon the white folds of her pretty dress and baby's long snowy robes.

Ambrose Rochemont, looking up at them from beneath, wishes that an artist could have transferred them to canvas, and stands still a moment to look and admire.

"The baby is getting so pretty now, Ambrose," Maude says, "do come and look at her."

And Ambrose, with his bright handsome

face turned up to Maude, says, "I am looking at you—give me time."

In the Hall, the June sunshine is lying on the quaint façade, with its old shield and tracery, and on Madame as she sits by the open window of the sitting-room, resting quietly as she thinks upon the fatigues of the double marriage. The sunshine lies, too, upon the smooth lawn where the three fair girls yet left to her are sitting with the guests who have been bidden to the wedding. Madame's eyes linger fondly on the twins, and Christine, whose hair is making a perfect aureole round her head as the sunshine catches it.

Then the Squire comes in, and throwing himself into a chair by his wife's side, says:

"Well, Grace, it has gone off well, but we are so much the poorer. Still, thank God, both the girls are happy, and we have always each other left, even if those three little ones take themselves off."

"Yes, Gabriel, God is very good to us; let us try more and more to serve Him."

"Yes, yes, my dear, and He is a good Master to serve. I wish I had known Him sooner." The Squire took his wife's hand, adding: "Dear, you have served Him all your life, and you have been the best of wives to me, and brought up our children to tread in your steps. God will bless you for it."

Later in the same evening we will take a last

look at the Cottage, nestling in the woods, which are now gleaming in the western light.

The windows in the Cottage were shining like stars, and the golden glory played round the head of little Nina, as Katherine carried her into the house, exhausted with the excitement of the day and her honours as little bridesmaid to her two cousins.

The sun was nearly set now, and threw a last gleam of radiance across the grass where Mr. Miles and Bridget stood.

Her hand was in his, and she clasped the other over it as she said:

"I must go in to mother now."

"Yes," he said, "I must not be selfish. I shall soon have you to myself—when?"

"On St. Michael's Day. It was my father's birthday, and I should like to keep the memory of him this time by coming to you."

"It is a bright thought of yours, as your thoughts mostly are."

"My birthday," Bridget went on, "is on the 27th, two days before. I shall be twenty-eight before I am married."

"Only twenty-eight," he said. "Still so young, while I——"

"We won't talk of age to-night," she answered. "Besides, don't you know that 'the low sun gives the colour;' look round now and see how true it is—and the last roses of the year are always the sweetest."

"That is pleasant doctrine for me," he said.

"There, the last ray of sunlight is gone now, and then 'Creation will broaden to our view.' You remember that sonnet, don't you?"

"I do indeed, and the morning you first repeated it to me, the morning Ria died."

"Yes, and when the low sun, which gives this beautiful colour to the late years of my life, sets, shall we not understand, you and I, Bridget, that Life, like Light, conceals the highest beauty of the higher and better life, and that Death does but open to us the kingdom of heaven, by Him who conquered Death?" They were both silent then, and walked slowly towards the Cottage door.

The voice of joy and health was indeed heard in the Three Homes on this fair evening, as the thanksgiving of loving hearts ascended to God while the roses sent up their fragrance like incense, in the profound calm of the summer night.

THE END.

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